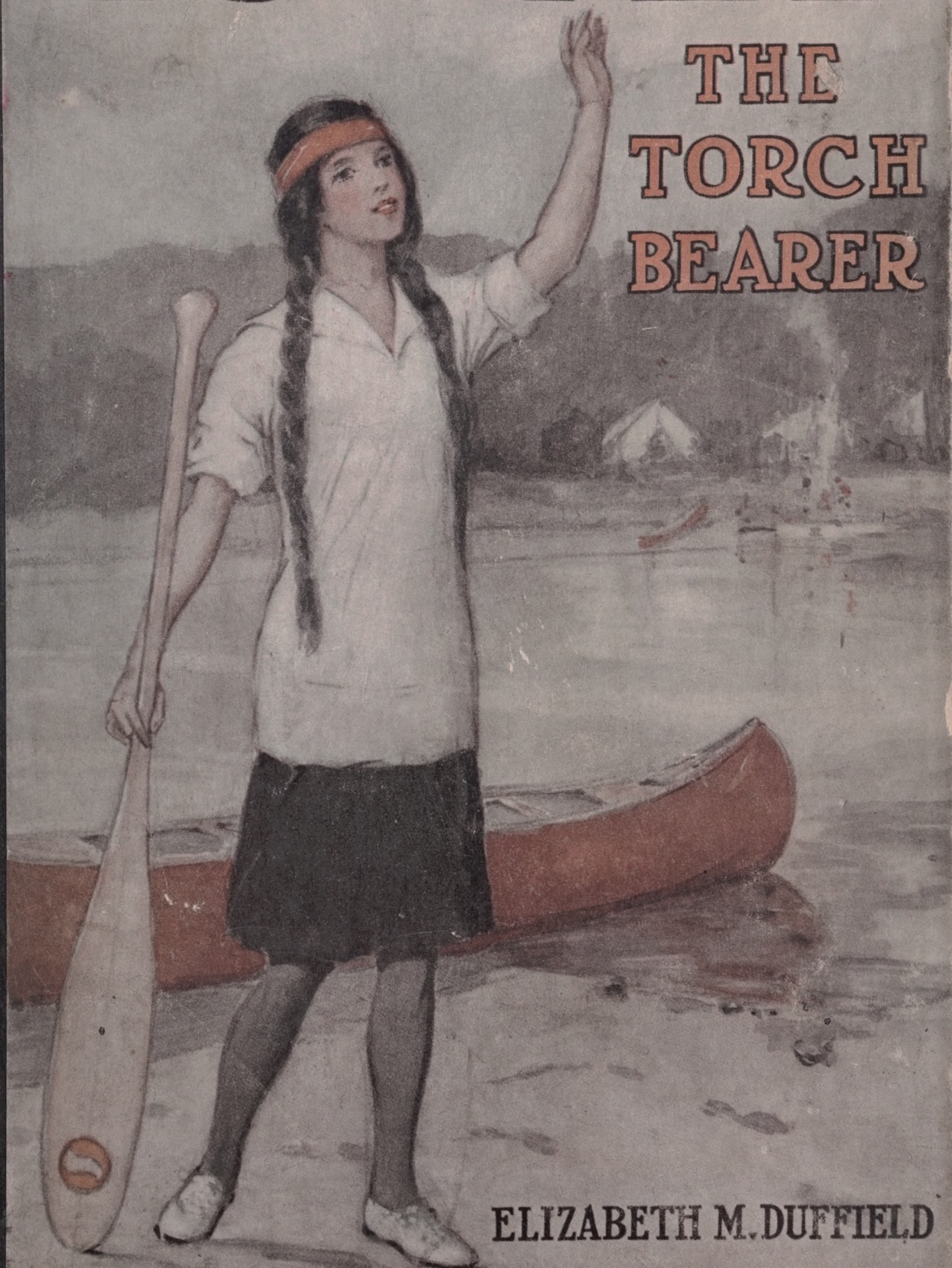


LUCILLE

THE TORCH BEARER



ELIZABETH M. DUFFIELD



Class

PZ 7

Book

D877 Lw

Copyright N^o

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.



"IN THREE POWERFUL STROKES IT FORGED AHEAD."

LUCILE

THE TORCH BEARER

BY
ELIZABETH M. DUFFIELD

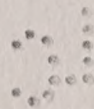
ILLUSTRATED BY
M. P. TAYLOR



NEW YORK
SULLY AND KLEINTEICH

PZ 7
J 877
Lw

COPYRIGHT, 1915, BY
SULLY AND KLEINTEICH



\$ 1.00

OCT 15 1915

© Cl. A 414061

no 1

new 018'15-

FOREWORD

THE organization of Camp-fire Girls, although of recent origin, has had an astonishing growth and bids fair to rival the Boy Scout movement, with whose aims and ideals it has many things in common. Its watchword of "Wo-He-Lo," framed from the first two letters of Work, Health and Love, clearly indicates the vigorous, noble womanhood it seeks to attain for its members. The Camp-fire is the symbol of the happy, outdoor life with its wholesome activities, and the various grades of Wood-gatherer, Fire-maker and Torch-bearer are a spur to the girls' ambition. It has its badges, pledges, cheers and watchwords, all tinged with the air of beauty and romance that appeal so strongly to young girls. Nothing but good can come from such an organization, and it is the hope of the author that the story of Lucile and her comrades may stimulate the formation of similar Camp-fire lodges in every town and city of the country.

E. M. D.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE GREAT IDEA	I
II. CAPTURED BY THE ENEMY	16
III. THE CAMP-FIRE OATH	30
IV. "THE POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL"	46
V. TOWARD THE GOAL	59
VI. A GLORIOUS SURPRISE	72
VII. LITTLE BLACK RASCAL	95
VIII. THE RIVAL CAMP	115
IX. "MANY A SLIP"	130
X. IT'S FAIRYLAND	144
XI. ALMOST A TRAGEDY	161
XII. THE FURY OF THE STORM	175
XIII. TOO CURIOUS	192
XIV. A TIMELY RESCUE	213
XV. THE PANTHER SPRINGS	228
XVI. HEARTS UNITED	251
XVII. "LIKE OTHER GIRLS"	260
XVIII. VICTORY!	277

ILLUSTRATIONS

"In three powerful strokes it forged ahead."

(See page 289.) *Frontispiece* ✓

FACING PAGE

"Margaret led them from one to the other
of her favorites."

56 ✓

"That light that has been given to me I de-
sire to pass, undimmed, to others."

160 ✓

"For a few breathless moments, they thought
that their signal would pass unnoticed." ..

218 ✓

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT IDEA

"JESSIE, Jessie, the most wonderful thing has happened! You'd never guess it in a hundred years!"

"Well, since I haven't a hundred years to waste, I guess I won't try," came the lazy reply, and Jessie reached out her hand for another bon-bon.

Lucile Payton tossed her pretty head impatiently. "Don't be a stupid old bear," she said. "Here I've run all the way from Marjorie's to tell you the news, and you won't stop reading your old book long enough to listen to me. That's gratitude for you!"

"Nay, you wrong me," Jessie assured her. "See, even as you accuse me of base ingratitude, I lay aside the offending novel and beg, nay, implore——"

"If you will just put off begging and imploring until to-morrow morning," Lucile interrupted, "I may be able to say my say this afternoon. If not——"

"Go ahead, I'm all ears," said Jessie, as she helped herself to another chocolate.

"Well," began Lucile, "I was passing Marjorie Hanlan's house this afternoon on the way home and Marjie called me up on the porch. Then she told me that she, Dorothy Davis, Evelyn Ferris and—oh, who was the other one——"

"Ruth Cashaw is Evelyn's chum," Jessie suggested, helpfully.

"Yes, she's the one. Well, she said they were thinking of starting a club of camp-fire girls. And the best thing about it is that they want us to join. Do you suppose we can?"

For once Jessie forgot candy in her excitement.

"Of course, we can," she cried. "Oh, Lucy, that will be great! Why, just the other day, mother was saying she wished something of the kind would be started here. She said she thought it was a splendid idea. Oh, I'm so glad! How long do you suppose it would take?"

"You never can tell. It may take a week and it may take a month. You see, first of all we have to get some one to act as guardian of the fire. The girls didn't seem to have any idea whom they would ask, until I suggested Miss Howland."

"Yes, she's just the one," Jessie broke in. "She'd

join in the fun and have as good a time as any of us girls. Didn't they like the idea?"

"Like it! Why, they took to it like ducks to water! It's funny they didn't think of it before."

"Isn't it," Jessie agreed. "Then, if we get her consent, can't we start right in?"

"Oh, no," Lucile shook her head decidedly. "First she has to send to National Headquarters for her license. Then we all have to swear to obey the camp-fire law and then—well, then I suppose we are camp-fire girls."

"You don't seem to be very sure about it," Jessie remarked. "What is the camp-fire law anyway?"

"I don't know exactly," Lucile admitted, "but the girls gave me a book that tells all about it."

"Let's see, we might as well look at it, now."

"Don't you think we'd better wait till we have more time," Lucile suggested. "Oh, I have an idea——"

"Wonderful," Jessie cried. "Tell me about it before you forget it."

"Put on your things and come over to the house with me," Lucile went on, calmly ignoring the sarcasm. "You can stay over night, can't you?"

"I guess so. Wait a minute till I write a note to

mother. You never can tell when she will reach home when she goes to see Aunt Edna."

The note was soon written and the pair started out merrily, so elated over the new project that they felt, as Lucile said, as if anybody by just looking at them must know that there was something unusual afoot.

They formed a striking contrast, these two, Lucile with her dark curls and pretty, piquant face, never quiet for two consecutive minutes of the day; and Jessie, blue-eyed and blond-haired, taking life with an easy-going indifference that worried her mother and aggravated her friends. Jessie's motto was—"Never do to-day what you can do to-morrow." And yet, the two girls were sworn friends, drawn together, perhaps, by that very dissimilarity.

As they paused before the door, Jessie put into words the awful thought that had been haunting Lucile all the way home.

"Suppose," she said in a hushed voice. "Suppose your mother won't let you."

"Don't," cried Lucile, clapping her hands to her ears. "Don't say another word, or I won't have the courage to go in. I'm sure she'll consent."

"Glad you're so positive," Jessie murmured, gloom-

ily. But she found herself talking to the empty air. Lucile was flying down the hall toward the closed door of the sitting-room.

With scant ceremony she burst open the door and disclosed to view a very handsome, very distinguished lady, reclining gracefully in an easy chair near the window.

"Mother, mother," Lucile cried, flinging her arms around her mother's neck. "I have something very important to ask you and you must say yes before I ask it. Please," she coaxed, pressing her pretty face against her mother's.

"I can't very well say anything until you stop choking me," said Mrs. Payton, a shade impatiently. "There, that's better," she added as Lucile loosened her clasp. "Now tell me what you want."

"Won't you say yes, first," Lucile pleaded, although some of the sunshine had gone from her face.

Mrs. Payton settled back with an air of bored good-nature. "I don't suppose it will do any harm to say yes," she said. "But I can't promise that I won't take it back, later. Now say what you have to say, honey, but be quick, for it's almost time for dinner."

So Lucile told of their plans and hopes and all she

knew of the origin of the Camp-Fire Girls while her mother listened, idly turning the pages of a book she had been reading.

"And so, mother," Lucile concluded, "you see why I was so very anxious for you to say yes. You won't take it back, now, will you?"

"No, I don't see why I should," Mrs. Payton answered, absently. "It seems to me that the idea is rather good, and if you can persuade Miss Howland to act as your adviser I shan't object to your plans in the least. But, now," with a wave of her hand that definitely dismissed the topic, "run along and get ready for dinner; you'll have just time."

There was nothing to do but obey, so, after kissing her mother gratefully, Lucile went in search of Jessie. But some of her enthusiasm had gone and there was a dull, persistent ache at her heart.

"I don't see why I should feel this way," she reasoned to herself. "I have mother's consent and everything's going just right and yet,—oh, I can't help it." Although she herself scarcely realized it, what she most needed was a mother's full understanding and sympathy, and this she had never received from Mrs. Payton, who was too engrossed with her numerous

social obligations to spend much time or thought upon her children.

Lucile found Jessie curled up in a window-seat in the library, contentedly reading "Ivanhoe."

"Well," she said, as Lucile entered, "what's the news?" Then as she caught sight of her friend's troubled face, the book fell with a crash and she cried out, "Oh, Lucy, you're never going to tell me that you can't——"

"Oh, no," Lucile assured her. "Everything is all O. K. Mother likes the idea and thinks it will be a good thing for both of us."

"Then will you kindly explain why you come in here looking as if you had just lost your last friend and scaring me almost to death," said Jessie, reproachfully. "Why you ought to be the happiest person in the world—besides me," she added as an afterthought.

"So I am," said Lucile. "I don't see why I shouldn't be," she added, defiantly. "Let's look over the book till dinner's ready."

So they did and Jessie, who more than half guessed what was troubling her friend, talked with such infectious enthusiasm, that the two girls were soon in gales

of merriment. In the midst of their fun, the door opened and a hearty voice called out,

"What's the joke, girls? Can't you let me in on it?"

"Oh, Dad," Lucile cried, running to him. "I'm so glad you've come. We're going to be camp-fire girls."

"How are you, Jessie? Camp-fire girls, you say? What's that? Anything like a suffragette?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, hardly," Lucile scouted the idea, contemptuously. "Come over here and we'll tell you about it so that you can never make such a mistake again."

So, with his arm about each of the girls, Mr. Payton listened attentively to Lucile's story. "And you actually intend to learn to cook," he asked, incredulously, when she had finished, "and wash dishes and mend and darn stockings—why, my dear little girls, where do you expect to glean all this knowledge?"

"Why home, I suppose," Lucile answered, rather doubtfully. "Mary will show me how to cook and I can darn my own stockings and I don't suppose Mary will object to my washing the dishes now and then."

"All that is easy enough," sighed Jessie, "but the really hard thing will be to go without candy and ice-

cream for a whole month. I don't believe I can ever do it."

Mr. Payton laughed. "That will be hard on you, Jessie, won't it? They ought to give you double credit for such sacrifice. Just the same," he added, gravely, "it will be the best thing in the world for both of you."

"As long as you feel that way about it, Dad," Lucile broke in, mischievously, "you certainly won't object to eating a few heavy biscuits now and then."

"You don't really expect——" he began, in feigned dismay, and then added soberly, "I thought that camp-fire girls were supposed to serve only light biscuits."

"So they are, but I guess even camp-fire girls have to make some mistakes when they're learning. Oh, there's the dinner gong. Come on, both of you," she cried, merrily. "Perhaps this is the last good meal you'll have in some time, so you'd better make the most of it."

"That we will," said Mr. Payton, rising with alacrity. "I hope Mary has spread herself to-night."

"I wonder what can be detaining Philip," Mrs.

Payton remarked, when they were all seated around the table. "He is generally home before this."

"I saw him in Lawrence field this afternoon," Lucile volunteered. "He was playing baseball with some other boy scouts. He was pitching, and I tell you he did some good work."

"That boy of ours is some baseball player, and I'm proud of him," said Mr. Payton. "He has some of the finest curves I ever saw. He ought to make his mark on the college diamond some of these days."

"What's that, Dad," came a clear voice behind them, and the object of discussion took his seat at the table. Without waiting for an answer, he promptly fell to on the tempting viands before him.

"Make believe this doesn't taste good," he said, contentedly. "I'm starved."

"Have a good game this afternoon, Phil?" Mr. Payton asked.

"Great," said Phil. "We played the Greys and ran rings around them. I tell you they're not in our class! What's up with the girls?" he asked, a moment later. "They look as if they had just had a million left them."

"It's better than that," Mr. Payton laughed. "They've decided to form a club of camp-fire girls."

Phil's face showed interest. "Is that straight?" he asked.

"Well, rather," Lucile asserted, staunchly. "It seems to me a boy scout ought to sympathize with us."

"So I do. When are you going to start in?"

"As soon as Miss Howland can get her license to act as guardian of the fire," Jessie answered.

Phil's commendation was hearty. "That will be bully," he said. "Miss Howland's a jolly good sort."

And so she was. Several years ago when Miss Howland was a very young girl there had come to Burleigh a handsome young civil engineer with a commission to build a bridge across West River. For a year, while the bridge had been in process of construction, it had been whispered through Burleigh that when Hamilton Wescott returned to New York, Helen would go with him as his bride. But when at last the bridge was built and the bleak winter set in, young Wescott had gone back to New York and Helen had remained in Burleigh. If she had felt any regret at his going, she had hidden it in her own heart. Since then she had become deeply interested in all things

charitable and had given freely of her large fortune toward their support. Cheerful, generous, sympathetic and, withal, beautiful, she had become the idol of all the young people in town. So, when Phil said warmly, though a trifle inelegantly, that Miss Howland was a "jolly good sort" he only expressed the general admiration and respect in which she was held.

After dinner the girls slipped off to Lucile's room to have their first good look at the camp-fire book. Jessie stretched herself comfortably on the divan and Lucile sat beside her in an easy chair.

"You read and I'll listen," suggested Jessie with a yawn.

"Rather an unfair division of labor, don't you think?"

"I should say there wasn't any division," drawled Jessie, lazily. "You see, I know how much you like to read and I wouldn't deprive you of that pleasure for the world."

"Your kindness is appreciated," Lucile scoffed. "However, I'll read to you if you will promise on your word of honor that you won't go to sleep. Last time I read four chapters before I found out that you were asleep and I don't intend to do it again."

"You won't have to. I promise to stay awake."

"All right. First we have to learn the law by heart. Here it is:

" 'It is my desire to become a camp-fire girl and to obey the law of the camp fire, which is to—

Seek beauty,
Give service,
Pursue knowledge,
Be trustworthy,
Hold on to health,
Glorify work,
Be happy.

" 'This law of the Camp Fire I will strive to follow.' There, now, you have the law. Do you think you can live up to it?" Lucile asked.

"I don't know about you," Jessie answered humbly, "but I know I can't—not right away, at any rate. We'll just have to do our best, even if it isn't much good. Go on, let's hear some more."

"Well, it seems the watchword is 'Wohelo' and it's made up of the first two letters of the words work, health and love. The first rank is that of 'wood-gatherer,' but she doesn't seem to have much to do.

Then, there's the fire-maker and—oh, Jessie, you ought to see the list of things she is supposed to do. It's about a mile long!"

"Please don't read it to-night, then," Jessie begged. "Perhaps the dawn will give me courage."

"I surely wouldn't read it to you, now—you'd go to sleep before I could get half way through."

"There you go maligning me again," Jessie complained, "when here I am as wide awake as you——"

"Listen," Lucile interrupted. "This is what the wood-gatherer has to say when she is about to become a fire-maker—

'As fuel is brought to the fire,
So I purpose to bring
My strength,
My ambition,
My joy
And my sorrow
To the fire
Of humankind.
For I will tend
As my fathers have tended,
And my fathers' fathers
Since time began,

The fire that is called
The love of man for man,
The love of man for God.'

I wonder," Lucile mused, letting the book drop from her fingers, "I wonder if we will ever become fire makers."

"Perhaps," said Jessie, "if we live long enough."

There came a tap at the door and Mrs. Payton entered. "It's time that you children were in bed," she said. "You would better put away the book for to-night. You will have plenty of time to look it over to-morrow. Good night. Sleep well," and with a rustle of silk she was gone, leaving behind her the faintest suggestion of delicate perfume.

A few minutes later the girls tumbled into the big bed and pulled the snowy sheets over them with a sigh of content.

"Oh, this feels good," Lucile confided to her pillow. "I almost feel as if—I—could—sleep—to-night."

"I'll get there first," challenged Jessie, sleepily.

But there was no reply and soon the room was quiet, save for the ticking of the busy little clock on the table and the doleful cry of an owl, as it flew away through the night.

CHAPTER II

CAPTURED BY THE ENEMY

EARLY the next morning, Lucile opened sleepy eyes on a sun-dazzled world. Outside her windows, the birds twittered joyfully and the air seemed alive with the busy hum of insects. An impertinent robin, bubbling over with pride and joy, balanced himself on the window-sill and poured his merry challenge into the room. "Cheer up, cheer up," he called and then with a saucy flirt of his wings, flew off through the perfume-laden air in search of his mate.

"It's waste of good time to stay in a stuffy room when it's so beautiful outside. Just wait a minute, Mr. Robin, and I'll be with you out there in the sunshine. Oh, what a glorious day it is," she cried, as she slipped her feet into bedroom slippers and crossed the room to the open window. "It makes you feel like living."

"What makes you feel like living?" queried a sleepy voice from the direction of the bed. "I should think

you would feel a good deal more like sleeping at this unearthly hour. I know I do," and Jessie pounded her pillow, vindictively, and turned over for another nap.

"Oh, that's to be expected," Lucile answered, dryly. "Whoever heard of Jessie getting up at six o'clock in the morning? However, I will tell you one thing," she added, severely. "You'll never be a camp-fire girl if you don't learn to get up early."

Jessie sat up suddenly and rubbed her eyes. "That reminds me of a dream I had last night," she said. "I dreamed I was a torch bearer and went around burning up everything in sight. They had all the fire engines in the city on duty, but they couldn't seem to put out the fire. It was the most vivid dream I ever had."

"It must have been," Lucile sniffed. "If Miss Howland knows when she's well off, she'll never make you a torch bearer. I guess there's not much danger, though," she added, slyly. "You have to be wide awake to attain that exalted rank."

"Nay, you are mistaken," Jessie corrected. "All I have to do to become a torch bearer is, as you have seen, to go to sleep. But, seriously, what is the idea of

getting up so early. You surely don't expect to get breakfast," she asked, anxiously.

"Hardly that," Lucile assured her. "Although, on a pinch I might scramble some eggs and make the coffee or chocolate."

"Ten to one, the eggs would be burned and the coffee boiled," Jessie yawned.

"Probably you would be like the girl who salted the eggs while they were in the shell, and then wondered why they tasted fresh," retorted Lucile. "You can go to sleep again if you want to, but I'm going to get dressed and take a walk before breakfast. Being healthy is one of the camp-fire laws, you know."

"Oh well, I suppose I'll have to get up, although I feel as if I'd just gone to bed," Jessie complained, as she sat up on the edge of the bed. "Without any exaggeration, I'd give ten dollars—if I had it—to any one who would give me permission to sleep for the next three hours."

"For ten dollars, I'd give you permission to sleep three years," Lucile replied, as she wrestled with an unruly lock of hair.

"Mercenary child," Jessie reproved her. "Now that

I know your weakness, I'm very glad I haven't the ten dollars," she added, virtuously.

"In the words of Miss Randolph," said Lucile, quoting their English teacher, "if you talked less, you would accomplish more."

Jessie reached for the pillow, but Lucile was already disappearing through the door. "Come down when you're ready," she called through the keyhole. "I'll be in the garden."

As Lucile emerged from the house into the warm, welcoming sunshine, she uttered a cry of delight. Over night a miracle had been wrought. The rose bushes, which had hitherto held only tightly closed buds, had been touched with the magic wand of summer and blossomed in golden, white and scarlet glory.

"Oh, you beauties," cried Lucile, delightedly, as she buried her nose deep in the heart of a great Jacques rose. "How did you ever get so beautiful all in one night?"

For a few happy minutes she went the rounds of the garden. Never before had she been up so early in the morning, and the experience was delightfully novel. She had heard birds sing before, but never as they did on that morning of wonders. Even the

grass looked greener, and the flowers were sprinkled with tiny diamonds that shone and glistened in the dazzling sun. All Nature was joyously, wonderfully awake.

"Don't you think I did well?" Jessie's voice broke in on her reverie. "I dressed in fifteen minutes by the clock. Oh," as she caught sight of the roses. "Did you ever see anything so pretty?"

"Aren't they great," Lucile answered. "Yesterday they were buds and to-day they are full-blown roses. Look at that big tea-rose over there."

A little while longer the girls lingered in the garden and then, selecting each a rose from their favorite bushes, they sauntered out on the road for a short walk before breakfast.

As they passed a pretty ivy-covered house a small, high voice called out the single word, "Hello."

Jessie started. "What's that?" she cried. "It sounded like a parrot."

"You are not very complimentary," laughed Lucile. "It's little Kenneth Weston and he's just three years old. This is sudden friendship on his part, though. He generally runs away if you look at him."

"Suppose we go and see if he runs away," Jessie

suggested. "All I can make out from here is a very curly head and a pair of blue eyes. I'd like to see the rest, provided, of course, that the young gentleman is willing."

"That's the question under discussion," replied Lucile. "It's more than probable that he isn't willing. However, we can but try, so come along," and she led the way up the steps.

Although little Kenneth was brave when protected by a screened-in porch, it must be confessed that he was very much of a coward when any vandals threatened to invade the sacred precincts of his fortress. So, now, when the girls ascended the steps with the evident intention of entering, he toddled post haste to his mother, who had just come out on the porch.

"Good morning, Mrs. Weston," Lucile called out. "This is my friend, Jessie Sanderson. We were passing the house," she went on, when they were seated in the broad, wicker arm chairs, "and Jessie caught sight of Kenneth on the porch, and thought she'd like to have a little closer look at him."

"But I'm afraid I'm going to be disappointed, after all," Jessie mourned, in a voice designed to move the young son and heir of the Westons, who was busily

engaged at that moment in keeping his mother between him and the visitors. "Why I can't even see as much of him now as I did before."

"Kenneth, honey, don't act like that," coaxed Mrs. Weston, as she disengaged his fingers and drew him to her lap. "Here are these two nice young ladies come to see you and you try to hide behind mother's skirt. That isn't a bit nice."

Just then some one called to Mrs. Weston from within the house and she placed "Ken," as his father fondly called him, in a chair with the admonition to "sit still and be a good boy till mother comes back."

The girls looked at one another and Jessie said in a stage whisper: "Perhaps he would like us better if we didn't say anything."

"No, that would probably scare him," Lucile telegraphed back. "If you will leave him to me, I think I can have him talking to us in a few minutes."

"Maybe you can, but I doubt it," Jessie answered, dubiously. "Go ahead, though. Nothing could be worse than this awful silence."

"You are up early this morning, Kenneth, aren't you," Lucile began sweetly, by way of an opening.

"No-o," Kenneth denied, twisting his neck to such an extent in the desperate effort to get as far as possible from Lucile that Jessie afterward declared "she thought it must break."

"Aren't you?" Lucile asked, in surprise. "Why I thought you were."

"No-o-o," and this time the denial was more emphatic than before.

Lucile began on another tack. "Oh, say, Kenneth," she said, with a fine show of enthusiasm, "have you seen my kitty—the pretty, gray one?"

Kenneth was interested. "Ye-es," he said, shyly venturing to look at his questioner. "Ye-es, I saw him."

Lucile shot a triumphant glance at Jessie. "Did you see what a funny little gray nose he has?" she went on, artfully.

Kenneth's shyness vanished and he nearly fell out of his chair in his excitement. "Ye-es," he said. "I saw funny 'ittle g'ay nose. Is it oor kitty?" and his big blue eyes regarded her with a new interest and respect.

"Uh-huh," Lucile assented. "We've had him for almost seven months now; just think of that."

Kenneth considered. He had a rather vague idea as to just what seven months was, but then it didn't matter—surely a gray kitten was more interesting than seven months. He looked up at Lucile with a shy little smile that made her want to hug him. "He walks so funny, too," he chuckled. "Just like dis," and slipping from his chair, he crept on all fours to the end of the porch and then sat back on his heels with a gurgle of delight. "Dat's de way," he informed them.

"Isn't he a dear?" Jessie cried. "You win, Lucy."

Just then Mrs. Weston appeared in the doorway and took in the situation with a glance. "What has he been doing now?" she asked, smilingly. "Playing automobile?"

"No," Kenneth volunteered, as he climbed into his mother's lap. "I was dust showin' dem how funny de 'ittle g'ay kitten walked."

"Yes, we had quite a demonstration," Jessie laughed. "He seems to be very fond of animals."

"Yes, he has always been interested in them," Mrs. Weston replied. "Even when he was a very little baby he used to prize a rubber dog I bought him above all his other possessions. When he gets to be a big boy

he shall have a real live doggie," she promised, stroking the golden head lovingly.

"Some day," Lucile invited, as she rose to go, "he must come over and see our kitten. I'm sure puss would be delighted."

"Wanna do now," Kenneth accepted, eagerly. "Muvver, let me do now."

"Not now, honey. Some day you may go over and play with him to your heart's content; but now you will have to have your breakfast. I hope you will come over again, soon," she said, cordially, turning to the girls. "You have made friends with Kenneth in a remarkably short time."

"We surely will," Lucile answered, heartily. "Good-by, Ken."

"We'll give your love to the little gray kitten," Jessie added.

When they had gone a good half block from the house, they could still hear the plaintive wail, "I wanna do now. Wanna do see 'ittle g'ay kitten."

"You surely did hit the nail on the head when you brought out that kitten talk, Lucy," Jessie commended her. "At first I thought he would never say anything but, 'no-o,' he seemed such a shy little thing."

"Oh, you can almost always get them interested in animals," answered Lucile. "To change the subject, what time do you suppose it is?"

"Haven't the slightest idea, but I imagine it must be getting pretty late," Jessie answered. "Shouldn't wonder if we had better turn back."

"Guess so," agreed Lucile. "We want to get to school this morning, because Edith said she might see Miss Howland last night, and if she did she expected to ask her to become guardian of the fire. I'm dying to hear what she has to say."

"Suppose Evelyn didn't see her last night?" Jessie questioned.

"Then we are all to go around to her house this afternoon after school and find out for ourselves," Lucile answered. "Come on, let's hurry."

"If you could only know how hungry I am," said Jessie, gaily, "you would realize there is no need to ask me to hurry. I feel as if I could eat the side of a house."

Although there was no side of a house awaiting them on their return, they managed to content themselves fairly well with the tempting substitute Mary provided.

When Mr. Payton saw the two, bright, rosy faces, he nodded approvingly. "If being prospective camp-fire girls includes rising early in the morning and brings out the roses this way," he said, gaily, "then I am heart and soul for the cause."

After breakfast the girls packed their books and raced off to school, anxious to learn the latest news. As they were entering the school yard, warm and out of breath with their long walk, a short, fair-haired girl detached herself from a group and came flying toward them.

"Hello, girls," she cried, and then, in answer to their unspoken question, "Yes, I saw Miss Howland last night and——"

"What," cried Lucile and Jessie with one voice.

"She said she would be very glad to accept," Evelyn, for it was she, announced, triumphantly.

By this time the rest of the girls had crowded around and were all talking at once. From the confused babble the only expressions distinguishable were, "Oh, isn't it great," or, "Suppose she had refused!" At last Lucile made her voice heard above the rest.

"When is she going to send for the license?" she asked, practically.

For a moment there was silence, and all the girls looked to Evelyn for an answer.

"She said she would send to headquarters first thing this morning," that important young person answered, promptly. "And oh, girls," she went on, with a new burst of enthusiasm, "just think what that means. Why, in a few weeks' time we ought to be able to call ourselves really and truly camp-fire girls."

"That's all very well," Ruth Cashaw, who was of a rather pessimistic turn of mind, remarked, gloomily. "But those things usually take longer than you imagine. I'd be surprised if everything were arranged within a month."

"Don't be a wet-blanket, Ruth," Lucile admonished, gaily, "I guess it won't be as bad as all that."

"Even if we did have to wait a month it might be a blessing in disguise," added Jessie, philosophically. "You always enjoy your blessings more when you have to wait for them."

"Hear, hear," Marjorie Hanlan exclaimed, with a merry laugh. "Jessie has the right idea."

"Dorothy's late this morning, isn't she," Lucile remarked suddenly. "It's almost time for the bell."

"I don't think she will be here to-day," Marjorie

volunteered. "I was over at her house last night and Mrs. Davis said she was feeling so ill that she probably wouldn't be able to come to school to-day. I hope she isn't very bad," she added, anxiously, for the two had always been very close friends.

"So do I," came in a chorus from all the girls, and Lucile added lightly, to cover her real concern, "I think we'd better drop around this afternoon and remind her that she can't be a camp-fire girl if she doesn't keep well. That ought to fix her up in a hurry."

"I shouldn't wonder if it would," Evelyn agreed. "It won't do any harm to try, anyway."

"Come on, girls," Ruth called, as she started toward the school. "There goes the first bell."

"Perhaps, instead of reminding poor Dorothy to hold on to health," remarked Jessie, sagely, as they reluctantly turned to follow Ruth, "we should more justly remind ourselves to pursue knowledge."

CHAPTER III

THE CAMP-FIRE OATH

THREE weeks passed and no word came from Miss Howland. To the impatient girls, each day dragged interminably, and they speculated darkly as to the cause of the delay.

Had Miss Howland decided, after all, that she would rather not act as their adviser? But, surely, that was not like her, for, if she had regretted her decision, it was the easiest thing in the world to let them know so that they could look for some one else to take her place. No, that supposition was plainly out of the question. Then, what could it be? Had headquarters refused the license?

"Well," remarked Lucile, at one of their after-school conferences, "it won't do any good for us to talk about it. We have suggested and disproved everything that could possibly have happened, and I don't suppose we are any nearer the real state of affairs than when we started."

"But, Lucy," Evelyn protested. "What can we do? Miss Howland said she would let us know as soon as she had received the license, but here it is Friday and we haven't heard a thing."

"She has had time to get the license a dozen times over," grumbled Ruth.

"Not quite a dozen times," Jessie yawned, as she turned over the leaves of a book she had picked up from the table. "In fact, I very much doubt if she has had time to receive it once. It seems to me," she went on, "that you girls are making rather a big fuss over nothing."

"F-fuss over nothing," Marjorie fairly stuttered in her indignation. "I wonder if anything ever troubles you, Jessie Sanderson. I believe if your best friend were drowning, you'd look on, indifferently and say to your next door neighbor, 'It seems to me she's making a big fuss about nothing,' " and she imitated Jessie's drawl to perfection.

Jessie flushed and was about to retort, angrily, when Lucile stepped promptly into the breach.

"For goodness sake, girls, don't quarrel," she entreated. "We have enough to worry about without that. There's the 'phone, Evelyn," she cried, as the

bell rang out its noisy summons. "Do see who it is and stop the noise."

Evelyn, for it was at her house they were holding the meeting, ran to the 'phone and took down the receiver.

"Hello, hello," she called, impatiently. "Yes, this is Benton 1546. This is Evelyn speaking. Oh, Miss Howland——"

At sound of the magic name, every girl grew tense and they listened breathlessly for the rest of the message.

"This afternoon. Good, I'm so glad!" then, after a pause, during which the girls fidgeted impatiently—"No, I don't think you will have to do that. The girls are all here and I'll tell them about it. Tomorrow?—oh, that will be great! Thank you so much for letting us know. Good-bye. Oh, girls," she cried, as she hung up the receiver, "at last it's come! Tomorrow we are to hold our first meeting at Miss Howland's house! Isn't it glorious?"

Glorious! Why, glorious was no name for it. It took the girls a few minutes to fully realize that their plans were actually materializing. Although they had been expecting this very news for the past week, now that

it had come it seemed to them, as Dorothy expressed it, "too absolutely perfect to be possible." Let it be said here that Dorothy had recovered with marvelous rapidity since the girls had reminded her of the "hold on to health law." Her case was only one more example of the power of mind over matter.

The time passed so quickly in joyful anticipation, that no one noticed what time it was getting to be until Lucile exclaimed suddenly, "Look at that clock, girls! Why we must have spent two mortal hours just talking! If I don't go right away I won't get any dinner," and she jumped down from her perch on the table and, after a wild search, found her hat under a chair with Evelyn's little black ball of a kitten fast asleep in it.

"Get up, pussy," she said, as she lifted him gently and placed him carefully on his tiny, uncertain legs. The kitten gave a prodigious yawn and promptly curled up and went to sleep on the spot where the hat had been. She gave him one last pat and then turned to Jessie. "Come on, Jessie," she cried, gayly. "It's time you and I were on our way."

As they were going out the door, Marjorie said,

with a glance at the girls, "Don't you think I'd better go home with you, Dot? I'm afraid there has been too much excitement for a sick girl."

"Sick!" Dorothy scouted the idea. "I'm no sicker than you are, Marjorie Hanlan, and what's more, I don't ever intend to be sick again."

The girls laughed and followed "her outraged highness" down the steps, and a happier group of girls could not be found in Burleigh that day.

Although Lucile had confided to Jessie that she was sure she could never wait till to-morrow afternoon, there were so many things to think of and arrange for, that almost before she knew it, Jessie had called and they were off to the first meeting of the camp-fire girls.

Every one but Dorothy and Marjorie was at the rendezvous before them, but soon after they arrived, the two belated ones were ushered in.

"Oh, I do wish she would come," Lucile confided to Ruth, who sat beside her on the divan. "I don't think I can stand the suspense much longer."

The words were scarcely spoken, when the portieres were pushed aside and Miss Howland stood framed in the doorway. She made a perfect picture, as, flushed

and breathless from her hurry, she glanced from one to the other of the girls.

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting," she apologized, in the sweet, low voice that was so peculiarly her own. "You must forgive me this time if I promise never to do so again. Have you been waiting very long?"

"Not very," answered Evelyn. "Ruth and I got here first, then Lucy and Jessie, and Marjie and Dot just came."

"Well then, it isn't quite as bad as I thought," said Miss Howland, with her bright smile. "Now, I suppose you are all anxious to get right down to business, so we can't start too soon. First of all," she went on, as the girls gathered round, expectantly, "I sent for the license, as I said I would, a month ago Tuesday. Yesterday I received it and realized that I had undertaken a great responsibility. But," with a smile at the look of distress that crossed the faces of her listeners, "I never once regretted the step I had taken, for I most thoroughly approve of the Camp-Fire movement. I have always had a general idea of its aims and theories, but when I found that I was going to become so closely connected with it, I studied the movement thoroughly.

The more I learned of it, the more I liked the idea, until now I believe that I am as enthusiastic as any of you girls can be and I want to help you in every way I can."

Miss Howland paused and glanced from one to the other of the intent faces before her, and found them all so full of gratitude and love, that she felt amply repaid for any trouble she might have taken.

"So much for my own feelings in the matter," she continued. "Now for the really important part. I suppose you all know the Camp-Fire Law?" she questioned.

"Oh, yes, we all learned that a long time ago," Lucile answered.

"Well, we will all have a chance to repeat it after a while, anyway. Of course you all know that there are three degrees of rank—first, woodgatherer—second, fire-maker—and third, torch-bearer. I am sure that it won't be very long before all my girls will at least own a camp-fire ring, for the duties of the woodgatherer are not difficult."

"But how are we going to prove ourselves worthy of the ring?" asked Marjorie.

"That is just what I was about to tell you. Now

this is my little plan. It is just two weeks to the end of school, and for that period I want you to keep a record of what you learn in the way of cooking, mending, gardening and anything else you may turn your hands to. When the two weeks are up I will be able to decide whether or not you have earned the rank. It may take some of you longer."

"Will it help if we go without candy and ice cream?" asked Lucile, with a mischievous glance at Jessie.

Miss Howland laughed. "Yes, that would help a great deal," she answered.

"It would be impossible for a girl who served heavy biscuits to an unsuspecting family to become a wood-gatherer, wouldn't it, Miss Howland?" Jessie suggested, lazily. "I happened to overhear one of our number threaten her father just the other day."

There was a general laugh, and Lucile retorted, good-naturedly, "How the dear child talks. She couldn't make even a heavy biscuit to save her life."

"However that may be," said Miss Howland, "we are all going to learn how to make very light, fluffy biscuits before we are very much older. And now," she went on, "since the preliminaries are over, we

might as well turn our attention to the actual organization of the club."

The girls' faces became grave and their hearts beat a little faster. The moment was at hand to which they had looked forward so eagerly. They were about to take the oath that would make them camp-fire girls.

"As I call you one by one," Miss Howland was saying, quietly, "you will repeat the law that will make you members of the camp-fire. Are you ready?" she asked, and the girls nodded assent.

"Lucile Payton——" Lucile started and gripped the arm of her chair. "Lucile Payton, is it your desire to become a camp-fire girl and obey the law of the camp-fire?"

As in a dream, Lucile stood up, vaguely conscious that all eyes were upon her and, still in a dream, heard herself repeating, "It is my desire to become a camp-fire girl and obey the law of the camp-fire which is—to seek beauty, give service, pursue knowledge, be trustworthy, hold on to health, glorify work, be happy. This law of the camp fire I will strive to follow."

Dimly Miss Howland's voice came to her, as she sank into her chair after making the sign of the fire. "Dorothy Davis, is it your desire——." And as she

thought of the words she had spoken a moment before, she promised herself to keep the law always to the best of her ability.

Miss Howland's voice broke in upon her reverie. "Well, girls," she was saying, seriously, "we have taken the oath, and I am sure that we are all going to try from now on to live up to the high aims and ideals of the camp-fire. And there is one more thing," she added, in a lighter tone, "that I would like to speak to you about."

The girls had been listening in sober earnestness so different from their first wild exhilaration, to their guardian's every word; but during the pause that followed, Evelyn, the irrepressible, broke out with: "I think I can almost understand now, Miss Howland, how you must have felt when you received the license that morning. You never realize how much you have undertaken until you can't get out of it. Not that I want to," she added, hastily, as the girls turned indignant eyes upon her.

"I guess you'd just better not," cried Ruth. "Why, you were the one that really started the idea of a camp-fire club."

"Evelyn Ferris, if you ever so much as hint that

you want to back out of this club," Jessie threatened, good-naturedly, "we won't wait for you to get out of your own accord. We'll just feel obliged to put you out."

"Don't worry, Evelyn," Marjorie remarked with biting sarcasm. "You will be a camp-fire girl at ninety if you wait for Jessie to put you out. She's——"

"You're right there," Lucile interrupted, quickly, coming to the defense of her friend. "Jessie is too kind hearted. She will leave that to the rest of you. What was that you were going to speak to us about, Miss Howland," she asked, during the roar of laughter that followed at Marjorie's expense.

"Yes, do tell us," entreated Dorothy, still red and breathless from laughing.

"Please do," Evelyn urged. "It was very rude of me to interrupt in the first place."

Those nearest Jessie thought they heard a murmured "quite true," but of course they could never be quite sure.

Miss Howland, who had been so thoroughly enjoying the fun that she had forgotten for the moment that she had anything special to say, tried to look dignified, which, by the way, is a very difficult feat for laughing

gray eyes and bewitching dimples that refuse to be overlooked, and failed so absolutely that the girls afterward confided to each other that they "wanted to hug her."

"I do declare I've forgotten what I was going to say," she began and, then suddenly she remembered and went on, earnestly, "You see, it's this way, girls. I went up to see little Margaret Stillman to-day."

"She's Judge Stillman's little girl, isn't she, the lame one?" Lucile asked.

"Yes, the lame one," Miss Howland answered. "There is a whole tragedy in those three words 'the lame one.' She has everything that money can buy, but she has been deprived of the one priceless gift, the gift of a good, sound, healthy body. Oh, girls, you can't imagine how pitiful it is—the little lame girl in the midst of all that elegance and luxury, so patient and good and so unutterably miserable and lonely." Miss Howland leaned toward them, her face flushed and her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"When she saw me this afternoon, she put her poor little thin arms around my neck and, with her head on my shoulder, sobbed as if her heart would break. When I tried to comfort her and show her how much

she had to live for, she broke from me and cried out, fiercely: 'Live for! I have nothing to live for but my father! He loves me dearly, but I want more than that—I want to be like other people! I want to be able to go out in the street without having people point to me and say—"There goes Margaret Stillman, the lame girl." I want to have friends, but what do the girls want of a cripple like me. Oh, I do try to be good and cheerful for father's sake, and you have been so good to me that sometimes I feel very wicked and ungrateful but, oh, I do so want to be like other girls!'"

A stifled sob came from a corner of the room, and Miss Howland looked from one to the other of the eager, girlish faces before her.

"Oh, and to think we never knew," Dorothy exclaimed, with a world of self-reproach in her voice. "Here we have been having such good times and we've never given a thought to anybody but our own selfish selves. Oh, Miss Howland, isn't there anything we could do to make up?" she asked, anxiously, as she wiped a tear from the end of her nose.

"Of course there is," Lucile broke in, before Miss Howland could answer. "What's the matter with our asking her to join our camp fire?"

"Join our camp fire," Ruth repeated, incredulously. "Why, Lucy, are you crazy? It would spoil all the fun!"

"Ruth Cashaw, I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself," exclaimed Marjorie, indignantly. "Spoil all the fun! Why, looking at it even from a selfish standpoint, do you think that we could possibly enjoy ourselves with the picture of that lonely girl before our eyes all day long? Maybe you could, but I couldn't."

"That's exactly the way I feel," Jessie put in, and turning to Miss Howland, she added, "It will be all right for us to ask her, won't it, Miss Howland? We all want to."

"Indeed we do," came in an eager chorus, and Lucile added, "Oh, Miss Howland, how soon can we?"

The new-made guardian of the fire regarded her little group of fire girls with a happy smile. She was so proud of these warm-hearted girls who would take the chance of spoiling their own good times rather than hurt one of their less fortunate sisters.

"You dear girls," she cried, "I knew you would do it. I didn't want to suggest it in the beginning, for fear you might think you had to, and I wanted you to

ask her of your own free will. But, in order to ask her to join, we must have a unanimous vote. All in favor of asking Margaret Stillman to become a camp-fire girl and join our club say 'aye'."

Even Ruth, now a trifle ashamed of her reluctance, joined in the "aye" and Miss Howland declared the vote to be unanimously carried.

"But who is going to ask her?" Lucile questioned.

"I thought of that," Miss Howland answered, "and it seems to me that the best thing to do would be for you all to go up to Judge Stillman's house, either tomorrow or next day. I won't go with you, for she might think you had come by my request. Then I thought it would be better for you all to go, so that she might see that you were all interested."

"Oh, that will be fine," cried Dorothy. "I simply can't wait until I see poor Margaret and tell her there are some girls who want to be friendly, anyway."

"That's the right spirit, Dorothy, and I'm proud of all my camp-fire girls. But it's getting late now, and I'm afraid your folks will be worried if you don't get home before dark."

"It is late," Marjorie admitted, "but it really seems as if we had just come."

A few minutes later, Miss Howland stood on her porch and waved good-by to the merry group hurrying down the street until they disappeared from view.

"Isn't she lovely," said Marjorie, as they turned the corner and lost sight of the graceful white figure of their guardian. "And, oh, girls, I don't think I ever enjoyed myself in all my life as I have this afternoon."

"Yes, only it hasn't been half long enough," sighed Lucile. "Isn't it wonderful, how time flies when you're enjoying yourself."

But the real enjoyment had come from the determination to help one little soul, struggling gallantly against great odds, to attain her birthright of love and friendship.

CHAPTER IV

"THE POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL"

SUNDAY passed uneventfully. All day long the rain came down in torrents, and even Lucile, who usually enjoyed nothing better than a good brisk walk in the rain, decided that she'd "rather enjoy it from the inside."

"Besides," she had told Jessie over the telephone, "I'm sure we can do more good and have more fun in the house trying to cook——"

" 'Trying' is good," Jessie interrupted.

"—than we could taking a muddy tramp in the rain," Lucile went on, ignoring the interruption.

"I'm sure of it," answered Jessie. "But, speaking of muddy tramps, I'll have to take one, if you expect me to come over to your house. Why don't you come over here?"

"Because everything is ready and Mary says she'll show us how to make biscuits if you hurry." Then she added in a stage whisper, "You'd better come, Jes-

sie, it's the chance of a lifetime. We may not be able to catch her in such a good humor for a week to come. There she is, now. Say 'yes' quick!”

And Jessie had answered, “All right, I'll be there if I have to swim!”

So the girls had learned to make biscuits, not the “sinker” variety, but light, fluffy, delicious ones that fairly melted in your mouth; and Mary, delighted at their progress, rashly promised to teach them all they wanted to know.

Next morning, Jessie, who had spent the night with Lucile, woke early, contrary to custom, and found her friend still asleep.

“Lucy,” she cried, “wake up! What do you mean by sleeping so late when we have the most exciting day of the whole year before us! Wake up, sleepy-head.”

“Wh-what's the matter?” yawned Lucile. “Is the house a'fire?”

“Of course not, silly,” said Jessie, disdainfully, for she was thoroughly enjoying the altered state of affairs. “I was just remarking that on such a beautiful day and when we have so much to do it is positively sinful to waste time in sleep.”

"Oh, that's all, is it," said Lucile, sinking back on her pillow with a relieved air. "I thought it must be something very serious to wake you up so early. Now that you've relieved your mind, you'd better try to get some more sleep; it's only about five o'clock."

"Five o'clock!" Jessie exclaimed. "I bet it's nearer six!"

"All right, it's easy enough to find out," Lucile answered, sleepily. "There's no use your looking at the clock," she added, following Jessie's glance. "That stopped about three days ago. But my watch is on the dresser."

So Jessie consulted the watch and saw to her surprise that the hands pointed to a little past five.

"You're right," she acknowledged. "It's only five o'clock, but I could have sworn it was later. I wonder how it ever happened."

"That's what I was wondering. But now, please come in here, Jessie, and go to sleep, unless," as an afterthought, "you'd like to stay awake so you can call me when it's time to get up."

"Watch me," said Jessie.

Nine o'clock found our camp-fire girls bending over

their books in a hard pursuit of knowledge. But it seemed to them that never in all their lives had they felt so little like studying. The day was one of those scorching ones that sometimes comes about the end of June as a forerunner to summer and it was so hard to banish visions of cool, tempting spots beside a brook or lake with a book to read and, perhaps, a juicy, red apple, right from the orchard with the heat of the sun still upon it. But to them came also the vision of a poor little girl, surrounded by wealth and luxury, and again they could hear Miss Howland's words——” deprived of the one priceless gift, the gift of a good, strong, healthy body——”

But all things must come to an end, and so, after what seemed an age of waiting to the impatient girls, the last gong rang and they were free.

“Oh, I'm so glad it's over!” Evelyn exclaimed as she picked out the books she needed to take home. “I did try hard to ‘pursue knowledge,’ but I'm afraid my trying didn't do very much good.”

A few moments later the girls emerged from the stuffy gloom of the school-room into the warm sunlight and were immediately engrossed in the one topic that

held interest for them nowadays. Suddenly, Jessie brought them to a standstill.

"Girls," she cried, "surely we aren't going in the right direction. Judge Stillman's house is down the other way!"

"Why of course we aren't," cried Lucile. "Margaret lives at Tenth and here we are at Fourth. I wonder if the heat's responsible."

"Don't put it off on the heat," said Jessie. "We aren't any crazier than usual, I guess. Come on, let's get back."

When they reached the great Stillman mansion, they were ushered into an imposing drawing-room by a still more imposing butler, who politely requested them "to wait."

The girls looked about them wonderingly at the soft velvet hangings that formed a rich background for marble busts of marvelous whiteness, and at the softly tinted pictures, all works of the masters, that lined the walls.

"It doesn't seem possible," Lucile observed in a low tone, "that we have come here to try to make Margaret Stillman happier, when she has all this to make her contented and happy."

"I'm really beginning to wish I hadn't come," said Marjorie, nervously. "It seems to me she has about all she could wish for without our bothering her. I declare, I'm almost tempted to slip away before that brass-buttoned thing gets back," and she glanced longingly at the door.

"But don't you remember what Miss Howland said," Dorothy reminded her gently, "about the one priceless gift?"

"That's right," Jessie added. "I guess we have all been forgetting that."

"Yes," said Lucile, "we can't back out now, girls—we've got to see the thing through."

At that moment the butler appeared in the doorway and announced that "Miss Stillman would see them" and would they "please follow him?"

"I'd follow him anywhere," Evelyn confided to Lucile as they ascended the broad stairway. "I like the way he carries his head—he looks as if he were trying to see how far he can push it back without snapping his collar bone!"

A moment later, the butler pushed aside some hangings, and the girls stepped into a large, airy room with great French windows all along one side of it that

opened upon a small balcony. Through the windows the girls caught glimpses of what seemed to be hundreds of flowers, mingling their purple, gold and scarlet in glorious confusion.

Dorothy, who had entered the room in advance of the others, gave a little gasp of delight and started toward the flowers.

"Oh, how love——" she cried, but stopped with the word half spoken, while a slow flush mounted from her throat to the roots of her hair. "Oh," she stammered, "Exc-cuse me," and then stopped, utterly at a loss.

For, halfway to the window, she had met the sober, questioning gaze of little Margaret Stillman, "the lame one," who was seated on the divan in the sunny corner of the room, half hidden by the cushions.

For a moment there was an awkward pause. Then Lucile advanced toward the girl, who seemed so much younger than she, and said, with her frank, winning smile, "I'm sure you must know who we are, Margaret, even if you don't know our names. We've passed you on the street many a time and we've all been so anxious to meet you that we just couldn't wait any longer."

“So we made up our minds that the only way we could meet you was to come to see you, and here we are,” supplemented Marjorie, who, at the sight of the pale, thin face and dark, questioning eyes of the little lame girl, had lost all uneasiness and felt only great sympathy and tenderness for one so infinitely less fortunate than herself.

Margaret looked from one to the other as if to make sure they were in earnest, and then extended one small hand timidly.

“I’m very glad to meet you all,” she said, shyly. “Won’t you please sit down?”

The girls complied readily, settling themselves in comfortable nooks and corners and Lucile continued:

“You see, it’s this way,” she said. “A few weeks ago we girls got it into our heads that it might be a good idea to form a camp-fire——”

Margaret leaned forward eagerly and a tinge of color came into her pale face. “Oh, I know all about the camp-fire girls,” she cried excitedly, all her shyness gone. “Did you form a camp-fire—did you?”

“Indeed we did,” Jessie broke in, fired by her enthusiasm. “And it’s going to be the greatest little camp-fire ever invented, isn’t it, girls?”

But the little invalid had settled back among her cushions, all the color had receded and left her face whiter than before, and again the tired, listless look veiled the natural beauty of her dark eyes—resentment was playing riot in her heart. Why had these strong, healthy girls come to tell her of the pleasures in store for them? Why did they wish to taunt her with her miserable weakness? Oh, it was cruel, cruel!

Lucile saw the change and guessed the reason.

“And so, Margaret, dear,” she said, taking the thin, white hand in both her own, “and so, Margaret, we have come to ask you to join us, to be one of us, to let us be your loving, loyal friends. Won’t you?”

Margaret looked into Lucile’s earnest eyes unbelievably. Surely there was some mistake. These girls, overflowing with life and vitality, they could not possibly want her, the cripple, the lame girl—oh, it was impossible!

And again came the gentle, insistent, “We want you so much, Margaret. Won’t you, please?” and again she met Lucile’s clear gaze and read there only unbounded tenderness and sympathy and understanding.

Very slowly the incredulity left her face and an an-

swering gleam of understanding and love crept into her dark eyes.

"Oh, you do mean it," she cried, joyfully. "I know you do! Thank you—oh thank you——" and she laid her head on Lucile's shoulder and cried "just because her heart was so full she couldn't help it," as she explained to the girls afterward.

And Lucile cried and all the girls cried, until there was danger of "their all having to swim home," to take Jessie's version of it.

But it was only an April shower and very soon Margaret looked up with a smile breaking through her tears and said "she was sorry to make such a fuss," but that she "would be all right presently."

Five minutes more and the sun was fairly out and the girls were pouring all their hopes and plans and ambitions into the eager ears of the prospective member.

"And next year Miss Howland says we may be able to arrange it so we can camp out for the summer. Then we can have a real camp-fire, and make believe we won't have some fun!" Dorothy was saying.

"Miss Howland," cried Margaret. "Is she going to be guardian? You didn't tell me that."

"Yes, that's the best part of it," Marjorie answered. "She is by far the loveliest person I ever met," emphatically.

"Indeed she is," said Margaret, and a thoughtful look came into her eyes.

"By the way, Margaret," Lucile broke in, "I've been dying to look at those gorgeous flowers. How do you ever get them to thrive like that?"

"Oh, I just take very good care of them," said Margaret, simply. "You may go out and look at them if you want to. If you will please hand me that crutch—there, behind you, Lucile—I'll go out with you."

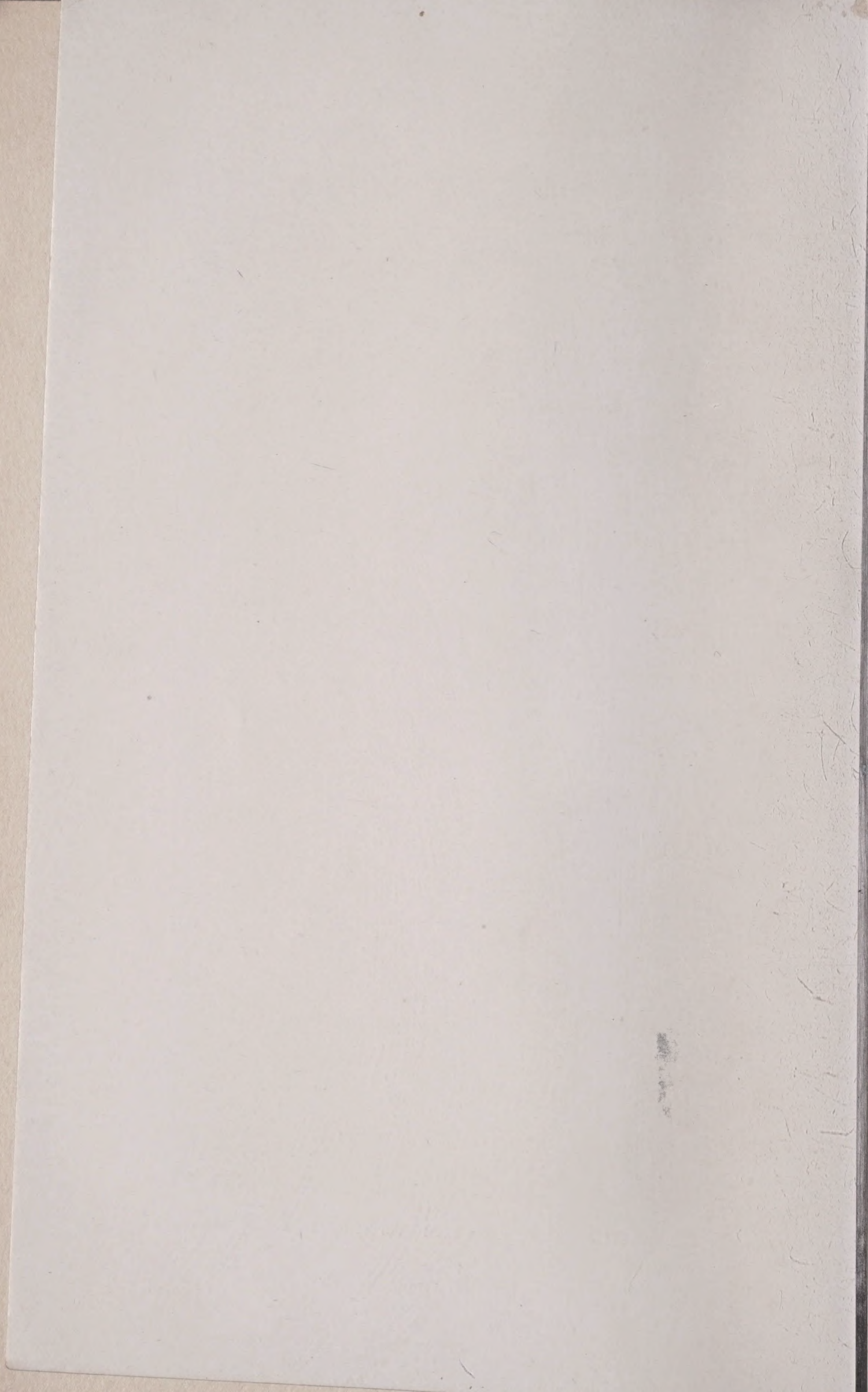
So they all stepped out upon the little balcony with its flowers basking in the afternoon sunshine, and Margaret led them from one to the other of her favorites.

It was a pretty sight—the little lame girl with her flushed face in her soft, white dress looking not unlike a flower herself—and the merry girls, now uttering little exclamations of delight and again listening with intent earnestness to their small guide's explanations.

The girls would willingly have stayed much longer, but as the relentless hands of the clock pointed to half



"MARGARET LED THEM FROM ONE TO THE OTHER OF HER FAVORITES."



past five, they reluctantly left the balcony and declared that they must go.

"Oh, must you so soon," cried Margaret in dismay. "Why, you have just come."

"I wish we didn't have to, but the folks will have the police reserves out looking for us if we don't turn up soon," laughed Evelyn.

"But you will come again, right away," Margaret begged. "Promise me you won't wait long."

"Indeed we won't," they cried, and Lucile added merrily, "We'll come so often that perhaps you will wish we would keep away. Don't forget next Saturday!"

"There's no danger of that," said Margaret as she pressed a button beside her.

"What's that for?" asked Dorohy.

"That's to call buttons, stupid," Marjorie answered.

"Maybe he'll break his neck going down, since he didn't on the way up," said Evelyn, hopefully.

"Oh, John isn't as bad as he looks," Margaret protested, gayly. "He'd *really* break his neck to do you a favor."

"Well, Evelyn, here's your chance," cried Lucile, merrily. "Have you thought what the favor will be?"

But the subject of their ridicule appearing at that particular moment, they were forced to take a last hurried leave of Margaret.

"Come on," whispered Jessie, "he won't wait!"

Another minute and they were following "buttons' " broad back down the stairs to the accompaniment of sundry suspicious gasps and gurgles that betokened anything but a lowness of spirits.

CHAPTER V

TOWARD THE GOAL

AFTER the memorable visit to Margaret there followed a train of happy events that welded closer their bond of friendship and melted days into weeks and weeks into months with astonishing rapidity. Although shy at first, Margaret had blossomed in the sunshine of their kindness and gentle consideration for her until she had finally come not only to be regarded by the girls, but to regard herself as one of them. Although she loved them all and did everything she could to show her gratitude, Lucile was her idol—the personification of all that was good and lovable. Lucile returned the little lame girl's affection with interest, the only difference being that, what on Margaret's part was adoration, in Lucile was changed to an overwhelming desire to protect and shield. And though the girls did all in their power to aid the little lame girl in her struggle to be like other girls, their help was offered so unobtrusively and with such unfailing tact, that she rarely felt that she was different and only

knew in her grateful heart that she was the happiest and luckiest girl in the world.

The days had been so full of duties and pleasures, that the girls had no time to note how fast they flew. Three months fled by on golden wings, and one bright morning Lucile, Marjorie and Evelyn awoke to find themselves "wood-gatherers," and it was not long before the others followed their lead.

As autumn raced past to give place to winter, together Lucile and Marjorie had waded through the long list of fire-maker's requirements, and on the same happy day pronounced the desire that made them proud owners of the silver bracelet. Although Evelyn had kept pace with Lucile and Marjorie to the wood-gatherer's goal, she had dropped back in the fight for fire-maker, until she found herself behind Jessie. Realizing that that would never do, she spurred on again, but found that Jessie was not the mean rival she had supposed. Elated by her success in getting ahead of Evelyn, Jessie had applied herself to her studies and duties with a fervor that surprised the girls. Now, the two were intense, though friendly rivals, and it was a matter of great interest to the girls to see who would get there first.

But Ruth and Dorothy, what of them? Well, in the first place, in spite of her firm resolution to keep well, Dorothy had more than once been forced to neglect school work and everything else because of severe colds. Any one who is subject to colds knows that they are the bitterest enemies of exertion.

And Ruth, well Ruth, after reaching the rank of wood-gatherer, seemed to think that she had done enough, and in spite of Evelyn's repeated urging and ridicule had continued on her own self-satisfied way, calmly announcing that "she didn't see why she had to hurry—there was plenty of time."

Three more girls had been added to their number—two of them sisters, Elsie and Eleanor Gordon—and Gertrude Church. At this time they had been members for nearly two months, and if they continued their good work, there was every reason to expect that all three would receive the wood-gatherer's ring before the end of the following month.

Now it was Friday, and the girls, gathered at Lucile's, were speculating on the surprise their guardian had promised them on the morrow.

"I wonder what it can be," Jessie was saying. "For the past week Miss Howland has looked so mysterious

that I can't wait till to-morrow to find out what it is all about."

"Yes, I've noticed it," broke in Margaret. "She has just the littlest suggestion of a smile at the corners of her mouth and you expect every minute that she will break out into a laugh."

"And her eyes," added Dorothy, excitedly. "Have you noticed them? Why they fairly dance. No matter how hard she tries to be serious, her eyes always give her away."

"Yes, they seem to say, 'Don't you wish you knew what I know?' Long before she spoke of a surprise I knew something was coming."

"Oh, girls," exclaimed Marjorie in a tone that made them all jump. "Here I've been doing nothing when I ought to be home tending to Pietro"—Pietro being the canary bird. "It's the hardest honor I ever tried to get, because I always forget him. Well, good-bye, I'm glad I thought of him in time," and after a peek in the glass to see that her hat was on straight, she rushed out of the door.

"Don't forget to-morrow," Lucile called after her.

"No danger," came the reply, and Marjorie was off to tend to Pietro, who, it must be confessed, was so

surprised by the unusual attentions showered upon him that he hadn't been able to give anything but a little astonished "peep" for the last week.

"That reminds me," observed Dorothy, a few minutes later, "I have to do the marketing for to-night and it will be too late if I don't hurry. Don't you want to go with me, Margaret? You said you were on duty this week, too."

"Surely I'll go along," Margaret answered, reaching for her crutch.

"Isn't anybody going to stay with me," mourned Lucile. "I don't want to be left all alone."

"I'd stay gladly, Lucy, but I have some work to-night that can't be put off," said Evelyn.

"Well, you surely will stay with me, won't you, Jessie?" she asked, as Jessie rose to go.

"Can't," was the laconic answer. "Evelyn is a little ahead of me now, and I've got to make up for lost time."

"Oh, all right, if you are all so busy I suppose you will have to go. As for me, I intend to do absolutely nothing for to-night."

"As usual," murmured Evelyn, and Jessie hustled her out of the door, "for which," she affirmed, "you

will be thankful to me some day. Lucy is dangerous when her temper's up."

Lucile sent one parting shot before she closed the door. "Such bad attempts at humor are only worthy of contempt," she said.

That night at dinner Phil remarked on Lucile's abstraction. "What's the matter, Lucy," he said, "anything gone wrong with the camp-fire?"

"No," came the preoccupied answer. "I was just wondering what the surprise will be."

But "all things come to him who waits," and so the morning came to ten impatient camp-fire girls.

Miss Howland didn't spend much time on ceremony that day, for, as the girls said, "she seemed as anxious to tell us the news as we were to hear it."

"Well, girls," she said, at last, "I promised you a pleasant, or at least I hope it will be a pleasant, surprise to-day, and I am going to redeem my promise right away." She glanced around at the expectant faces and laughed a little merry laugh as if, to quote the girls again, "she was so full of happiness that it bubbled over."

"Do you remember," she went on, "that when we first started the camp-fire—a year ago the day after

to-morrow—I said that next year we might be able to have a real camp-fire in the real woods?”

“Yes,” they breathed, excitedly.

“Well,” said their guardian, leaning back in her chair with an expression of immense enjoyment, “it looks as if that little prophecy were coming true.”

For a moment there was silence, while this astounding announcement had time to sink deep into their consciousness.

“A real camp in the real woods,” Lucile repeated, incredulously. “Oh, Miss Howland, do you really mean it?”

“Of course I mean it,” Miss Howland assured her, “and what’s more, with your parents’ consent, we will start the day after school closes—that is, in two weeks time.”

At last the girls were convinced that their good fortune was real and that the hope they had cherished in secret for the past year was not unfounded. They surrounded Miss Howland and showered her with questions until she was finally obliged to say, “If you will just sit down, girls, I will try to answer your questions one at a time and I’m sure we will get along much better.”

Obediently they arranged themselves in a semicircle about her and she started to explain.

"Last February," she began, "I bought a large tract of ground along the Mayaro River. It's a beautiful river and our camp would be situated on its banks. How do you like the idea?"

"Like it!" Evelyn cried. "Why it's what we have been longing for all the year."

"It will seem like a story," sighed Dorothy, contentedly.

"But, Miss Howland, there's one thing you haven't told us. Where are we going to get the tents and all the other things we would have to take on a trip like that?" Lucile asked.

"Have any of you any idea how much you turned in last year?" was Miss Howland's apparently irrelevant question. "Do you know, Lucile?"

"Why, no, not exactly," said Lucile, truthfully. "I know we made quite a good deal, though."

"Well, over and above all we have been able to contribute to charity, there has been enough to enable me to buy everything we need—tents, utensils and so forth. Of course each girl will have to furnish her own pillows and blankets and necessary clothing."

"About all we'll need in the way of clothing will be a middy and the camp bathing suit, won't it?" Eleanor inquired.

"Very nearly—except, of course, a traveling suit," Miss Howland assented.

"And we can go in bathing every day," cried Evelyn, rapturously. "Just think of it! I'll be tempted to live in my bathing suit!"

"But there's one thing we won't be able to have," put in Jessie. "And that's a boat. I don't suppose there are any up at the river, are there, Miss Howland?" she asked, hopefully.

"I'm afraid that is one thing we will have to do without," said Miss Howland, but there was a twinkle in her eye that none of them understood for a long time afterward.

At her words the girls grew thoughtful, for a summer on the very banks of a beautiful river without a single boat to launch upon it was practically unheard of. Miss Howland saw the cloud and hastened to change the subject.

"There are several small islands scattered through the river," she began, by way of description.

"Real islands?" Margaret cried. "Oh, I do like

islands. Ever since I read 'Robinson Crusoe' I've longed to be cast away on a desert island with savages, like Friday——"

"Savages," Marjorie interrupted, "are not very lovable creatures to my way of thinking. Islands are all right, but I must say I draw the line at making friends of those black-skinned wretches."

Margaret flushed and Lucile said quickly, "I shouldn't wonder if they would make as good friends as some white people."

"There won't be any hope of our meeting savages on those islands," said Miss Howland with a smile. "They are far too near civilization to be as romantic as all that."

Suddenly Ruth, who had been quietly thinking, broke out with, "What good will the islands do us, Miss Howland, if we haven't any boats to go over in? We can't walk."

The girls looked at one another in consternation, for here was a very obvious difficulty that they had not thought of, and they turned to their guardian for a solution.

All she said was, "Don't worry about that until we get there. We will get over to those islands if we

have to build a raft," which was an answer, if not a very satisfactory one.

"Do you mind if I ask you one more question, Miss Howland?" asked Gertrude Kent, who after the first burst of enthusiasm had been strangely silent.

"Go ahead," said Miss Howland, cheerily. "I'm ready to answer any number of them."

"I just wanted to know if we are to tell our folks about the plan right away," she said. "I'm afraid to, for fear they'll object."

"I don't think you need worry about that," said Miss Howland, with the same mysterious twinkle in her eyes that the girls had learned to know and watch for. So now they said never a word, but waited eagerly for the explanation they knew would follow.

"When I made up my mind," she began, "I intended to make sure first that nothing could happen to spoil it, so——"

"So you went to see our mothers and fathers and made sure of their consent before you mentioned it to us," Lucile finished for her.

"How did you guess it, Lucile?" Miss Howland exclaimed, delightedly. "I think you must be a mind reader."

"She doesn't need to be a mind reader to know that you always do the best thing for us," said Marjorie, warmly.

"Oh, now I know," cried Dorothy. "That's what you and mother were talking about that day I came home from school early and found you there."

"And now I can guess why Dad talked so strangely the other night," said Lucile. "He kept asking me all the time whether I didn't think it would be a good thing for me to get away to the country for a little while. Just wait till I see him to-night," this last with a threatening nod that boded ill for Mr. Payton.

For another hour they were kept busy discussing plans and prospects for the summer, and when they at last started for home their hearts were as light as air and they imagined themselves already in camp.

In fancy they could see the camp-fire—a real camp-fire now—they could see the flames dart wildly up, only to melt into nothingness against the black background of woods and sky—the weird, fantastic shadows thrown by dancing flames. And when the last ember flared and sputtered to its end, the veil of night would settle down upon them and then—silence, unbroken save for soft, woodland whispering—.

"If we only had a canoe," sighed Jessie, "the picture would be complete."

Even as she spoke Miss Howland rose lazily from her chair and in a soft voice addressed her mirrored reflection. "I wonder," she was saying, with a dreamy smile, "what my camp-fire girls would say if they knew I had still another surprise in store for them?"

CHAPTER VI

A GLORIOUS SURPRISE

THE great day had come at last—the day on which they were to start for Mayaro. Promptly at nine o'clock Miss Howland, our ten camp-fire girls and many of their friends and relatives stood on the platform, waiting for the nine five express.

At least a dozen times the said friends and relatives had said good-by and the girls had listened “several hundred times, at least,” to quote Evelyn, to the innumerable friendly and parental injunctions to “have a good time,” “take care of yourself,” and “don’t cause Miss Howland any trouble,” and then the express thundered around the curve and came to a standstill with great clanking and scraping of brakes.

The girls scrambled on board and leaned out of the car windows to call a last “good-by.” “Yes, I’ll remember,” “not a bit,” “sure, by the very first mail,” they called to the handkerchief-waving crowd on the platform, and were off.

“Well,” said Jessie, as she settled back in her seat,

"we have actually started. The last two weeks have seemed so long I was afraid we would never get off."

"It hasn't seemed long to me," observed Lucile. "There has been so much to attend to that I haven't had time to squeeze everything in."

"Well," Evelyn remarked, sagely, "I guess it all depends on your point of view, anyway. How long did you say it would take to get to Mayaro, Miss Howland?" she asked for the fifth time that morning.

"We'll reach Mayaro about two o'clock if there is no delay," Miss Howland answered with admirable patience.

Soon the girls became interested in watching the landscape as it rushed past them—and it was well worth watching, with its hills and plains, lakes and rivers, dense woods or scattered timber, all alike made beautiful by the soft green of summer. The ride proved all too short and they were distinctly disappointed when Miss Howland announced the next station to be Mayaro.

All disappointment vanished, however, to give place to unbounded delight when they stepped from the train to the platform and gazed about them.

"I never saw anything so beautiful," cried Lucile, and Miss Howland smiled her appreciation.

"I thought you would like it," she was saying, when the girls were startled by a voice behind them. They turned quickly and their gaze rested on the ungainly figure of a country boy about fifteen years old. He wore an old blue shirt, open at the throat, and a pair of overalls that would have been short for him two or three years before. His limbs were bare from below the ragged legs of the overalls to the tops of his ragged shoes. These last were very much too big for him—Jessie afterward declared that they looked "more like yards than feet"—and were so tattered and torn that it was a mystery how they ever stayed on at all. In his hand he held an old, broad-brimmed straw hat.

But when one looked at his face, they somehow forgot that his figure was ungainly and his clothing ragged; for his frank eyes held a haunting look of pathetic entreaty, as if they silently asked the world not to think too harshly of him.

"If you please, miss," he was saying, haltingly, "be you the lady that sent the telegraph ahead for the farm wagons?"

"I am," Miss Howland answered, kindly. "And you, I suppose, are the one who is to help me take my baggage to the river camp?"

"Yes, miss," he replied. "Is that your baggage down there at the other end of the station?" pointing to the great pile of canvas-covered luggage that lay where the freight men had left it.

Miss Howland signified assent and started off with him to supervise the loading.

"Did you ever see such a funny-looking thing in all your life?" Ruth whispered, as the girls looked after him. "The back view is even funnier than the front."

"I like him, just the same," declared Margaret, stoutly. "He has a good face even if his clothes are old."

"He looks as if he would do almost anything for you," observed Evelyn, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps he would be like Margaret's butler," Marjorie suggested. "Break his neck to do you a favor."

"Yes, here's where you might try again, Evelyn," Dorothy teased. "Buttons wouldn't break his neck for you, but maybe this one will be more obliging."

"All right, I'll ask him," Evelyn retorted, and

started up the station, as if she really meant to put her words into action.

"You'd better come back, Evelyn," Elsie warned, "he might bite."

As if he heard the words and understood their meaning, the boy turned and looked at them. In spite of themselves they flushed guiltily, but were saved from further embarrassment by their guardian, who at that moment beckoned them to come.

"Do you suppose he heard?" Elsie whispered in a panic, as they obeyed the summons.

"Of course not," Lucile answered, reassuringly. "But I must say it almost seemed as if he did," she added.

When they joined Miss Howland, she was giving some last directions to the boy and the driver of the other wagon.

"All right, miss," said the boy and sprang to the seat of the wagon. "Gid-dap," he cried, and away they rattled over the uneven ground until they disappeared along the thickly-wooded road.

"There was plenty of room in the two wagons for you girls," said Miss Howland, "but I thought it

would do us all good to walk. It's only a scant mile to the camp site."

"Oh, yes," agreed Lucile. "After sitting in that old train for five hours, it seems good to be able to walk again."

"And the scenery is so beautiful, too, that we want plenty of time to enjoy it," Jessie added.

So the girls and their guardian followed in the wake of the farm wagons along the beautiful country road. The day was typical of early July—warm, balmy, fragrant with the breath of growing things, vocal with the bubbling music of the birds.

To the left of them rose an embankment, perhaps eighteen or twenty feet in height, while on the right the ground dropped precipitously, affording a magnificent view of the valley below. Houses, half hidden by the trees and looking for all the world like "overgrown dolls' houses," dotted the green slope.

The girls fairly danced. "Look at it, look at it!" they cried. "Look at all the tiny houses and the tiny oxen and the little bits of trees!"

"And that must be a river down there," said Dorothy, pointing to a thread of silver, dimly visible through the dense foliage.

"Yes, that's Mayaro River," said Miss Howland.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"You mean that's where our camp is to be?" cried Lucile, excitedly, and the girls gazed at the stream with redoubled interest.

"Exactly," answered Miss Howland, smiling at their enthusiasm. "Our camp will be situated over there at the farther side."

"But how are we going to get there," asked Marjorie, after a moment.

"Well, since we can't fly and there doesn't seem to be anything nearly resembling an aeroplane anywhere in our immediate vicinity, it almost looks as if we would be obliged to walk," said Jessie all in one breath.

"My goodness, Jessie," cried Gertrude, who had not yet had time to get used to Jessie's manner of speech, "when did you swallow the dictionary?"

"Oh, she doesn't have to use the dictionary," Evelyn explained. "That particular form of insanity comes natural to her."

"I'm glad you told us about it," said Eleanor. "We will at least be prepared for the worst next time, but let us hope there will be no next time."

"Yes, it's very thoughtful of you," added Elsie, "the blow almost killed me this time."

"In spite of all the chatter," said Marjorie, who, up to this time had been waiting with an expression of bored tolerance for a chance to speak, "I don't seem to be any nearer having a sensible answer than I was in the beginning."

"How in the world do you expect us to tell you, when we don't know any more about it than you do?" Dorothy inquired, and it must be admitted there was some justice in the query.

"Perhaps Miss Howland will tell us," said Lucile, and Marjorie declared it "the only sensible suggestion yet!"

"What's that?" Miss Howland asked, rousing herself from an abstraction that had not been unpleasant, judging from the happy face she turned to the girls.

"Marjorie was just asking how we were to get to the river," Lucile repeated.

"Why we just follow the road," answered Miss Howland. "After we turn the bend, it slopes gradually until we reach the level of the valley. Do you see that little stretch of road way down there?" she asked, indicating what appeared to be a narrow path

winding down the side of the hill. "Well, that is only a continuation of the one we are on."

"But it seems so far away," Evelyn objected.

"It does look like quite a distance," Miss Howland admitted. "But it isn't as far as it looks. In fact, after we begin the descent it is only about half a mile."

The girls marveled at this, for if they had been asked to guess the distance, they would have judged it not less than two miles, perhaps more. Finally Lucile spoke.

"I suppose it must seem far to us because we are so much higher."

"That is it, of course," agreed Miss Howland; then as they turned a bend in the road, she added: "See, the road slopes down like that, twisting and turning until it reaches the valley."

The girls gazed before them at this fresh delight. For a distance, perhaps, of two or three hundred yards the road lay straight before them, then turned to the right until it was hidden by a wealth of trees and brilliant foliage. Everywhere were wild flowers—flowers, as Lucile said, "that begged to be gathered."

Gladly would the girls have lingered in this delightful spot, but when Miss Howland reminded them that camp had to be made before dark, they tore themselves away and went on. Never did they forget the rest of that journey to camp. The road twisted and turned continually, and each time they rounded a bend they thought the view disclosed more beautiful than the last.

Once, just before they reached the valley, they stumbled on a brook—a noisy little brook that went babbling merrily on its way through the woods, and the girls thought they heard in its tinkling laughter a merry challenge to “come along too.”

“Perhaps we can make up a little scouting party some day and if we do it would be a nice idea to follow the brook,” said Miss Howland.

“Really?” cried Lucile. “And we could take our lunch and be gone all day,” she said with sudden inspiration.

“Oh, could we, Miss Howland?” they cried.

“There’s not a reason in the world why we couldn’t,” said Miss Howland, merrily, and the girls laughed from a sheer overflow of happiness.

Soon they came upon the two farm wagons stand-

ing empty in the road. As they approached, Jim, as the boy called himself, and his companion emerged from the forest.

"We've put everything where you told us to, miss," said the former, addressing Miss Howland. "Is there anything more, miss?"

"No, I think that's all and thank you for the trouble you've taken," said Miss Howland.

"No trouble at all, miss," deprecated the boy. In another minute he had whipped up his horse and was rattling down the road, a fantastically pathetic figure in his flying rags.

"Who is he, Miss Howland?" asked Lucile, as a bend of the road hid him from view. "He has a fine face."

"I'm glad you think so," said Miss Howland, approvingly. "He is an orphan and has gone to work for a miserly farmer, who won't even give him decent clothes to wear in return for his services," and her eyes flashed, indignantly.

"But why does he stay there?" Jessie inquired. "I should think he'd try to get another place if they don't treat him well where he is."

"*That* is easier said than done," answered Miss

Howland. "Most of the farmers have more hands than they know what to do with, and if they didn't, they have no need for a boy. Well, there's no use making ourselves miserable," she said, as her old bright, cheery smile flashed out again. "Especially as we have a good deal of work to do before dark. Come along," and she led the way along a narrow foot-path that seemed to penetrate into the very heart of the woods.

Farther and farther they went, pushing aside the tangled undergrowth until they caught a glimpse through the trees of a smooth expanse of water, gleaming and sparkling in the bright afternoon sunlight.

"That must be it," whispered Jessie, gripping Lucile's arm, excitedly. "Oh, Lucy, we are actually here at last!"

"It looks like it," Lucile agreed, happily, and a moment later they emerged from the woods and looked eagerly about them.

From where they stood, the ground, almost bare of trees at this point, sloped gradually down to the water's edge. To the south, a miniature isthmus projected into the water and hid that portion of the river from view. But in front stretched the gleaming river

—its cool, translucent depths showing green against the darker background of foliage, while here and there the rigid outline was broken by the sharp points of many islands.

“Oh, Miss Howland,” Margaret cried, turning to her guardian a face aglow with feeling. “It is all so very wonderful,” and in those few words she perfectly expressed the wonder and delight that held them all enthralled.

But almost on the instant there came to the girls the same thought. “Oh, if we only had a boat to launch on that beautiful river. It’s only an aggravation to look at the water when we can’t go out on it.”

Miss Howland understood and read the thought as she stood looking down upon them, with a flush on her cheek and a sparkle in her eye.

“Suppose we cross the little isthmus,” she said, after a minute. “We are going to make camp on the other side.”

“I was wondering where the things were,” said Lucile, striving to put aside gloomy thoughts.

The attempt was not wholly successful at first, and the little group followed their guardian almost in silence. By the time they had passed half way across

the narrow stretch of land, they had regained most of their spirits and by the time they had reached the other side the sun was fairly out.

"And all this side of the isthmus for the distance of a mile," Miss Howland was saying, "belongs to us for the next two months."

The girls glanced toward the water, stopped, looked back again, and then gazed at one another in open-mouthed astonishment. Were they dreaming or had their senses played them a trick?

There, before their very eyes, swaying rhythmically with the gentle swell of the ripples, lay a veritable fleet of canoes.

Standing there, hardly daring to believe the evidence of their eyes, the girls were divided between two emotions. They wanted to rush forward, to grasp the canoes and make sure they were real—yet, for a moment they hesitated, swayed by the vague fear that if they moved, the spell would be broken and the canoes, so magically conjured there, would fade into thin air and be gone.

It was only a moment they hesitated, however, for the next instant Jessie broke the silence with a shout.

"Girls," she cried, "don't stand there like a lot of

wooden Indians! Can't you see that they are canoes, real canoes?"

"B-but," Dorothy stammered, "how did they get here? They can't walk."

"What difference does it make as long as they are here. I don't care how they got here," and Jessie started on a run toward the water.

"Come on, girls," cried Lucile, following Jessie's lead. "We aren't dreaming—I know, because I just pinched myself. Those are sure enough canoes!"

Down they raced to the water's edge—all except Margaret, who followed more slowly with Miss Howland.

The canoes did not fade away and vanish at their approach as they more than half expected, but proved to be the real thing—good substantial craft that it would take many a hard blow to disable.

This new development, coming, as it did, on the very heels of their former depression, caused the inevitable reaction. They went wild with excitement and nearly fell into the water several times in their frantic efforts to get the canoes on shore for a careful examination.

"But we don't even know they belong to us," cried

Lucy, sitting back on her heels and looking about her. The girls regarded her in dismay.

"Yes," said Dorothy. "Here we've been taking everything for granted and they probably aren't ours at all."

Marjorie jumped to her feet. "I'm going to ask Miss Howland," she said, decidedly.

Then it was that Lucile made the all-important discovery.

"Girls, come here, quick," she shouted. "Look, this one has Dorothy's name on the bow, 'Ramona.'"

There was a wild rush and the girls saw the marvel with their own eyes.

"Then they *do* belong to us," cried Evelyn. "Oh, girls, what more is going to happen to us to-day?"

"There's mine," Jessie broke in.

"And mine," cried Gertrude.

"Look, they have called the great war canoe, 'Aloea,'" cried Margaret, her face radiant.

"But who are 'they,'" said Lucile, voicing the thought that had begun to force its way through their excitement.

"Yes, where did the canoes come from?" echoed Jessie.

"Miss Howland, was it you?" cried Dorothy, springing up and turning to her guardian.

"No," said Miss Howland, and the twinkle in her eye deepened as she watched amazement steal over their faces. "I had nothing whatever to do with it.

"Nothing whatev——" Marjorie repeated. "Well, then who did?" she finished, abruptly.

"I'll give you three guesses," answered Miss Howland, enjoying herself immensely, "and whoever guesses correctly will have the privilege of launching her canoe first."

"It couldn't have come from National Headquarters?" Lucile hazarded.

"No," came the answer.

"Was it old Doctor Monroe?" Evelyn asked, for the good old doctor had evinced much interest in the camp-fire movement.

"No," said Miss Howland, again. "Now, remember, you only have one more guess," she reminded them.

Hurriedly the girls thought of every one they knew, but rejected one after another, for some had not the money to spend and many of those who had, lacked the inclination to it.

Suddenly Margaret rose and, regarding Miss Howland with an expression of doubt and hope intermingled, said, so softly that only those nearest could hear—"Was it—could it be my father?"

"You are right, Margaret, dear," said Miss Howland, drawing the little figure toward her. "It was Judge Stillman!"

"Judge Stillman!" they cried, incredulously, and then, even as the thought crossed her mind, Evelyn added, "Why, Margaret must have known!"

Margaret flushed red with anger. "I knew nothing about my father's plans," she said, drawing herself up, proudly, "but I *do* know my father!"

The girls were silenced. Before them arose a vision of Judge Stillman as they had come to think of him—proud, silent, austere, pursuing his own solitary path and seemingly oblivious to the friendship or hatred of those about him. And yet he had done this thing—had given them twelve perfect canoes for no apparent reason—except, perhaps, in return for their befriending his crippled daughter.

Suddenly Lucile rose and cried, "Let's give three cheers for Judge Stillman, friend of the camp-fire girls."

The cheers were given with enthusiasm, and then the girls fell upon Margaret and hugged her until she gasped for mercy.

"Oh, Margaret, you *are* lucky," cried Lucile. "Now you can be the first one to try the canoe."

"Do hurry!" cried Marjorie. "I can't wait to feel the paddle in my hand and maybe Miss Howland will let us all go after you," and she looked imploringly at her guardian.

"I don't know but what we'd better postpone our pleasure until after the work is done," said Miss Howland. "It's getting late, and if we expect to make camp and get anything to eat before ten o'clock to-night, we'll have to begin right away."

The girls saw the wisdom of the decision, but it was with many a reluctant glance backward that they followed their guardian up the embankment toward the great, canvas-covered pile that was to be their shelter for the summer.

"The sooner we get at it, the sooner it will be done," remarked Lucile—and get at it they did, with a vigor that delighted Miss Howland and surprised themselves.

Lucile was working busily over a stubborn knot

that refused to come undone, when Miss Howland touched her on the shoulder. She straightened up and shook the hair out of her eyes.

"That's pretty hard work," she said, drawing a long breath. "I thought the knot was there for good."

"You've been doing wonders," said Miss Howland, approvingly. "In another half hour we ought to be all through. But I think you and your squad had better stop work now and start the supper. I imagine very little of it will go begging to-night," she added with a twinkle in her eye.

It was not long before a savory odor from the direction of the mess tent was setting the girls wild with anticipation, and when at last Lucile announced that "supper was ready," there was a concerted rush for the "good things."

The supper was delicious and the girls ate ravenously.

"It tastes awfully good," said Dorothy, "only I keep thinking of the canoes all the time and I can't half enjoy it."

The dusk was fast fading into night when the girls ran lightly down to the water's edge and waited eagerly for Margaret to make the start.

"Don't go any further than the bend," Miss Howland was saying. "And whatever you do, keep close to the shore."

Then the graceful little craft stole silently from the shore, moving lightly along the still water. At the bend of the river Margaret obediently turned the canoe and headed it for the landing.

"How was it?" cried Dorothy, when she came within hearing distance.

"Oh, it's great," Margaret called back. "Why don't you all try it?"

The girls looked questioningly at Miss Howland. "I guess we needn't wait any longer," she said.

Joyfully, the girls tumbled into the canoes and pushed them away from the shore.

"Isn't it steady?" marveled Jessie. "My cousin, Donald—you remember him, don't you, Lucy?—Donald has a sixteen footer and its awfully wobbly."

"Yes, a foot makes a great big lot of difference," said Lucile.

As they floated, the soft night settled down and made of the world a place of shadows and mystery. Then one by one the stars appeared and their myriad

reflections danced and shimmered in the mystic depths of the river.

"I never thought I'd live to reach the stars," Lucile whispered to Miss Howland. "But to-night they're all within our reach," and she touched a star with the tip of her paddle, sending it into a hundred points of glancing light.

"Ah, but that is the mistake we all make too often," said Miss Howland, softly. "We reach out blindly to grasp the reflected star, only to realize too late the mistake we have made."

Lucile glanced at her guardian in surprise and fancied she caught a fleeting suggestion of pain in the clear profile, but a second later the face Miss Howland turned to her wore the old cheery smile.

When at the end of an hour they softly fastened the canoes and made their way to the tents, the girls were happy—happier than they could ever remember having been in all their lives.

"And this is the end of our first day in the woods," said Jessie, as she slipped in between the covers.

"Yes, and such a day as it has been," Lucile added, as she prepared to follow her example. "My one regret is that I can't take the canoe to bed with me."

"You can do better than that. Why not go out and sleep in it?" Jessie suggested.

"Perhaps I will some day," answered Lucy, sleepily.

CHAPTER VII

LITTLE BLACK RASCAL

"LUCILE, what *is* the matter? Wake up, wake up!"

Lucile opened her eyes and looked straight into Jessie's anxious face.

"What is it?" she asked, dazedly, for she had been having a strange dream and the spell of it was still upon her. "Surely, it can't be morning yet?"

"Surely it can," Jessie answered, imitating Lucile's sleepy voice to perfection. "What do you mean by frightening me so? I thought that you were dying. What was the matter—were you having a bad dream?"

"Rather," Lucile answered, evasively.

"Well, I'm glad you are over it," she said with a relieved air. "I was just going to call Miss Howland when you woke up."

"What time is it?" asked Lucile. "It can't be very late, for I can't hear a soul stirring."

"It isn't—it's only about quarter past six. I

shouldn't be stirring either if it weren't for you," she added reproachfully.

"Well, you needn't blame me," laughed Lucile. "I'm not responsible for what I do in my sleep. Come," she added, as she caught an inviting glimpse of the river. "Now that we're awake we might as well put on our bathing suits and take a swim. Miss Howland said we could because the ground slopes very gradually from the shore out."

"I suppose we might as well, since we can't sleep any more," Jessie agreed. "Guess I have your bathing suit, Lucy," she said a moment later as she examined the emblem on the sleeve. "Unless you want to take my place and let me be fire-maker. Here, this is yours. See if you have mine over there."

"Wait a minute—yes, here it is," after a quick rummage in her bag. "Now hurry and put it on. I'm crazy to see how the river will look by daylight."

A few minutes more and the girls emerged from the tent into the brilliant sunshine.

"Whew, it's going to be hot to-day," cried Jessie, as the hot rays struck full upon them. "If it's this way now, what will it be about two o'clock this afternoon."

"Can't imagine," Lucile answered. "But there is one thing I *can* imagine," she added, starting on a run for the river, "and that is how the water will feel. Come on, Jessie, I'll race you to the bank."

Needless to say Lucile got there first, for although camp-fire training had done much to counteract Jessie's laziness, she would never be as fleet of foot and active as Lucile.

And, oh, the water did feel *so* good! Lucile could not remember the time when she had not loved it. Now as she swam with long, powerful strokes toward the bend of the river, the old, wild thrill of exultation surged over her and she felt as if she could swim for miles. All the strange, weird fancies of the night were swallowed up in the rushing tide of vivid reality. Oh, how good it felt!

"Wait a minute, Lucy, can't you?" Jessie's reproachful voice came to her faintly. "I can't possibly keep up with you when you swim so fast."

Lucile gave a little joyful laugh. She felt that she could do anything on this wonderful day. "Wait where you are," she called, "and I'll swim to you. I want to see how long it takes me."

"All right," Jessie answered. "Only hurry up, be-

cause you promised to teach me the 'crawl' and the girls will all be down soon."

Jessie had not long to wait, for she had hardly finished speaking when Lucile drew up beside her, shaking the water out of her eyes and gasping for breath.

"How do you do it?" Jessie cried in admiration. "I don't think I could ever learn to swim the way you do."

"Oh, yes you could," Lucile assured her. "All you want is practice. See, this is the way," and she started off again.

"No you don't," Jessie cried, catching Lucile's foot as it passed her and holding on tight. "If you once get started you won't come back and I will be minus a much-needed swimming lesson. Please, Lucy."

"If you will kindly release my foot, I'll endeavor to favor you with the desired instruction," said Lucile with an attempt at dignity, which, it must be admitted, was to some extent spoiled by her extremely undignified position.

The humor of the situation struck the girls at the same time and Jessie released the captured foot with a laugh.

"Oh well, if you promise not to run away, I'll think

about it," she said. "Now, please, Lucy, show me how you do it."

So for the next fifteen minutes Lucile patiently instructed her willing pupil in the art of swimming until at the end of that time Jessie had become quite proficient in the "crawl" and "side-stroke."

The appearance of Miss Howland and the other girls cut the lesson short and they rushed to their tent.

"I didn't know we had stayed so long," whispered Lucile anxiously. "Now I wonder if we'll have time to get breakfast before the girls are ready?"

"Guess we will," Jessie answered, reassuringly. "If they only like the water as much as we did it will be easy."

In less time than it takes to tell the girls were dressed and had the kettle boiling for breakfast. None too soon, however, for just then they heard the girls' talk and laughter as they hurried to their tents to dress.

"We'll have just about time, I guess," Lucile muttered as she hurriedly put the bacon in the pan.

"For goodness sake, talk so a person can hear you," said Jessie from the other side of the tent. "I strain

my ears to hear what you have to say and then, nine times out of ten, I can't make it out."

"Oh, don't bother me," Lucile cried, impatiently. "It's a great pity if I can't talk to myself once in a while."

"That reminds me of a joke I heard once," Jessie observed.

"This bacon will never get done," Lucile broke in, as she made a vindictive dig at the offending bacon. "Well, what was the joke?" she asked a minute later, suddenly remembering that Jessie had said something.

"Oh, it wasn't anything much," Jessie answered in an offended tone. "I don't know whether I'll tell it to you at all now."

"Don't be a goose, Jessie dear," said Lucile, sweetly, as she placed the temptingly crisp bacon on the platter. "Go ahead and tell me the joke. You oughtn't to mind what I say when I'm frying bacon. Now, what is it—quick, before the girls come! When they smell this there'll be a rush."

"Well," Jessie began, somewhat mollified, "it was about a man that got into the habit of talking to himself, and he did it so much that one time a friend of his asked him why he did it. He answered that once in

a while he had a desire to talk to a sensible man and hear a sensible man talk."

"My case exactly," Lucile laughingly affirmed, as she put the last finishing touches to the breakfast. "Here they are now," she added, as voices were heard coming toward the tent. "We are just in the nick of time."

After breakfast Miss Howland informed the girls that she thought they would spend this one day in looking around them and exploring the neighboring country.

"If you like," she finished, "we can take some lunch and follow the little brook we passed yesterday."

The girls were enthusiastic and soon were rushing around under their guardian's direction, intent on leaving everything shipshape.

When at last Miss Howland declared the camp "spotless," they picked up the two large baskets, filled to the top with delicious eatables, and filed away through the woods.

"I wish we could use the canoes in the brook," Dorothy remarked, with a regretful glance over her shoulder in their direction.

"Some day we will take a canoe trip across the river

and visit some of the islands," Miss Howland promised.

"Won't that be great!" cried Evelyn, delightedly.

"It seems as if every day we have something better to look forward to than we did the day before," Margaret sighed, contentedly, and the girls all agreed with her.

After a short tramp they reached the brook and stopped to give Margaret a much-needed rest. While they waited, their delighted gaze followed the merry stream of water as it wound its busy way into the very heart of the woods.

"It is pretty," exclaimed Marjorie, after a moment's contemplation, and Lucile added with all her heart, "It's the prettiest thing I ever saw!"

And then they picked up the baskets once more and prepared to follow where it led.

"Have you ever been through this far, Miss Howland?" asked Jessie, when they had gone some distance along the path.

"Oh, yes, much farther than this," Miss Howland answered. "In fact, I don't think we shall penetrate into the part of the woods that I am not familiar with. But," she added with a smile, noticing the expression

of disappointment that shadowed the bright faces, "I think that when you see how much of the forest I know, you will be glad enough to turn back. Look there," she cried, as a tiny brown rabbit scurried along the path and disappeared in the undergrowth, "the woods are full of those little creatures."

"Isn't it dear?" cried Lucile, as she parted the bushes and started in pursuit. "Come, bunny—come, bunny," she cried.

"As if that would be likely to bring him out of his burrow," Marjorie sniffed. "You surely don't expect to catch him, do you, Lucy?"

"No, but I *have* caught something else," cried Lucile, excitedly, and as if to give verity to her words, there came to the ears of the astonished girls a short, sharp bark.

They looked at one another in perplexity, and then they all turned to Miss Howland.

But their guardian had already started after Lucile, and they had no alternative but to follow, which they did readily.

What they saw a moment later made them gasp. Down on her knees in the grass was Lucile, with her arms around a shaggy, wriggling little animal that

was by this time giving utterance to a series of short, excited barks.

"Let me take the dog, Lucile," Miss Howland was saying, and her voice was stern.

Without a word Lucile gathered up the black, curly ball and handed him to Miss Howland. The little dog settled himself comfortably and his barks gave place to a soft, whining sound as he snuggled his head against her shoulder. Miss Howland stroked the shining black coat gently, but when she spoke it was in a tone new to the girls.

"I want it to be understood," she said, quietly, "that in the future no one of you is ever to touch a stray dog without my permission. Of course," she continued more gently, "in this case the dog is so small that he could do little or no harm, and if I were in the habit of allowing exceptions to my rules, this case would supply an instance. However, as I'm not, the only thing to do is to leave all dogs, large and small, alone."

During the entire speech the girls had regarded their guardian with a look in which there were blended wonder, admiration and a new respect. For a moment after she had finished there was a deep

silence, broken by Lucile, as she said, earnestly, "I will remember." They were only three words, but Miss Howland was satisfied.

"Well," she said in a lighter tone, "now that that question is settled we might as well turn our attention to this little mischief-maker," indicating the little black bunch of contentment in her arms.

It was as if the sun had suddenly burst through a cloud on a stormy day. The girls found their tongues once more and crowded around Miss Howland, stroking the dog, wondering at the glossy silkiness of his coat and speculating largely on every possible explanation of how such an extremely small mite of a dog came to be wandering alone in the dense woods with no visible owner.

"He must belong to somebody," said Lucile, a puzzled frown on her pretty face. "See, he has a collar," and pulling aside the thick hair, she disclosed the almost hidden strip of leather.

Miss Howland examined the collar with interest. "It has the letter J scratched on the plate," she announced, after a moment's close scrutiny. "But the question is how we are going to find out whether J stands for the name of the dog or his owner."

"I suppose we'll have to give him back to his owner if we can find him," observed Jessie regretfully.

"Certainly," Miss Howland acquiesced. "I wonder if he will be sorry to leave us. Will you, doggie?" and she gave the curly head a gentle pat.

The dog opened one sleepy eye and wagged his bit of a tail so hard that the girls immediately took it for consent.

"What kind of a dog is it, Miss Howland?" Evelyn asked, as they started off once more.

"He isn't much of anything just at present," Miss Howland answered, smilingly. "But he gives promise of being a fine water spaniel one of these days, when he grows up."

"A water spaniel," Jessie cried. "Oh, wouldn't he be a fine dog to keep in camp? We could paddle him around in the canoes and have lots of fun."

"If only he didn't have a collar," Dorothy mourned, with a gigantic sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of her soul.

"Don't feel as bad as all that about it," laughed Marjorie, throwing her arm about Dorothy's shoulders. "All we have to do is to take it off, you know."

Just at that moment the puppy evinced a very

strong desire to stand on its own short legs, so Miss Howland set him on the ground while the girls watched with interest to see what he would do next.

With a vigorous shake of his round body that nearly made him lose his balance, the dog put his nose to the ground and trotted off into the woods.

At a signal from Miss Howland, the girls started to follow, when they were arrested by a shrill whistle that seemed to come from the woods somewhere to the right of them.

Startled, they looked as always to Miss Howland for directions.

"Stay here," she commanded in a low tone, "till we see what this means."

She had scarcely finished speaking when there came a series of sharp, joyous barks, followed by a shouted exclamation of delight.

"So ye've come at last, ye rascal," cried an excited masculine voice. "I thought sure this time I'd lost ye. Where have ye been all the time while your master's been scourin' the woods for ye? Answer me, now."

Then followed a pause, during which the dog seemed trying to follow his master's direction, judging from the noise.

"It's all very well for ye to be tellin' me all that," the voice continued, "but I don't believe it—not one word of it. Now, what be ye up to, runnin' round in rings an' lookin' up to me so invitin' like. Want me to follow ye—that what ye're up to? Well, have it your own way, as long as ye don't git lost agin. Lead away, old feller, I'm followin'."

During the last of this monologue the voice had been coming nearer and nearer to the spot where the girls had halted, and now the bushes were pushed aside and the owner of the voice confronted them.

The girls gasped with astonishment, for the red hair, the tattered clothing, but, most of all, the clear, steady, gray eyes could belong to none other than the boy who had driven their luggage to the river the day before.

But if the girls had been surprised at this sudden apparition, Jim was literally stupefied at the sight of Miss Howland and her following.

"Wh-what," he stammered, while his face slowly reddened. "I-I-beg your pardon. I didn't know——" and his voice trailed off into silence.

Miss Howland quickly came to his rescue. "Is this your dog, Jim?" she asked. "We found him just a

little time ago and have been wishing we could find the owner."

"Yes, I'm his master," Jim answered, adding, with a broad smile, "at least I am when he isn't lost. Jed never was a stay-at-home."

"Oh, is that what the J stands for on his collar?" Lucile cried impulsively.

"Yes," he answered again, this time venturing to look at his questioner. "I named him that when I found him, just a wee mite of a puppy over to Trotter Crossing. He was nigh dead with the cold and hunger, so I took him home and fed him. Come here, Jed," and after a wistful glance in Miss Howland's direction, the little dog ambled up to his master and stood ready for some petting.

"Good-by, Jed," said Miss Howland, "I will have to ask your master to bring you over to see us once in a while, so we won't feel that we have quite lost you."

"Oh, I do wish we could keep him," said Jessie to Lucile in an undertone. "It seems too bad to give him up so soon."

The boy raised the little dog in his arms and stood stroking the shining coat tenderly, while he glanced from one to the other of the regretful faces before

him. Several times he seemed about to speak and then thought better of it.

Finally he spoke haltingly, with his eyes upon the ground, as if weighing every word before he spoke it: "As long as you have found him and he seems to have taken such a fancy to you," here he glanced at Miss Howland with a fleeting, uncertain smile, "perhaps you would like to keep him at the camp with you?"

Surprised delight ran through the little ring of girls like an electric current, but their faces fell again as Miss Howland answered, gravely: "It is one of the finest and most unselfish offers I have ever listened to, Jim, and we all thank you heartily for it, but of course we could not think of accepting. Why, you dear boy, do you think for a minute that we could rob you of your little pet that you have cared for so faithfully and take him where you could see him only occasionally, if at all?"

"Oh, but I want you to take him," the boy broke in eagerly; "it was kind of hard to think of leavin' him at first, but I'll at least know that he has a good home and that he'll be wanted."

"But surely you want him," Evelyn broke in.

"Yes, miss, to be sure *I* want him, but there be

others around and about the farm that don't. But won't ye please take him," he begged, again appealing to Miss Howland. "I'd be so pleased if ye wud!"

"Well, if you're sure you want us to have the little fellow," Miss Howland answered, with her winning smile, "we will be very glad to take him, for we need a dog about the camp. He's rather small at present, but he will grow. Won't you stay and have luncheon with us, Jim?" indicating the baskets. "Judging from the position of the sun it must be very near high noon. At least it is high time we all had something to eat."

And so it was settled that Jed was to become definitely a part of the camp-fire company. They made a merry party at lunch that day, as the girls sat around in a circle, Jim and Jed occupying the place of honor at Miss Howland's right, and the delicious eatables that disappeared so fast spread on the snowy cloth in the center. The girls declared that Jed was by far the best mannered of the whole company.

"Why he sat up there just like a human and never barked or made any fuss unless Jim told him to speak," Lucile observed later, when they were talking over the events of the day. "Oh, he is the dearest—the best-behaved—the very cutest little dog—ever," each en-

dearing epithet emphasized by a hug of the black bundle in her lap.

After lunch they gathered up the remains of the feast and Jim said good-by to his pet.

"And you will let me come to see him once in a while?" the boy turned back to ask, wistfully.

"Yes, indeed. Come as often as you like," Miss Howland answered cordially; "we shall always be very glad to see you."

Jim murmured a "thank you," and stumbled off through the woods without even a backward glance.

"Perhaps he was afraid to look back," Margaret speculated as they started on their way again, "for fear he might be tempted to come back and get Jed after all."

"Perhaps you are right, Margaret dear," said Miss Howland, fondly; "the only way you can hope to resist temptation is to put yourself beyond its reach."

The girls had lingered longer than they imagined over the lunch, and as the sun was traveling fast toward the western horizon, Miss Howland gave the word to return. There were so many interesting bits of nature to occupy their attention that the return journey proved all too short.

"Look, there is the road right in front of us," Lucile exclaimed in a disappointed tone. "I never thought we'd get back so quickly."

"Yes, it seems as if it had only taken us half the time to get back that it did to go," Evelyn agreed.

Miss Howland smiled. "I wonder what you would say if I should tell you that the return trip has taken us nearly an hour longer." Then as the girls uttered an incredulous protest, she added, "If you doubt it, look at the sun. He is my witness," and, sure enough, the sun, which had been high in the heavens when they started, was now fast nearing the horizon, showing that the long summer afternoon was at last drawing to a close.

As they emerged from the cool, shadowy woods into the bright sunlight, they turned to take a final farewell of the friendly brook.

Little did they think as they stood in the hot road on that summer afternoon that along the shining ripples of the brook would come a message full of happiness for one they loved, bringing joy to them on the wings of that other's happiness.

That night as they sat around the table, Jed hugged close to Lucile's side and gratefully accepted the scraps

of meat that she surreptitiously fed him from time to time.

"If you don't look out you'll spoil him, Lucile," Jessie remarked.

"Oh, he's too little to be spoiled," said Lucile. "Anyway, nothing's too good for him," she added, defiantly.

And Jed, watching her with shining eyes, thumped his mite of a tail upon the ground as if to say he thoroughly agreed with her.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RIVAL CAMP

FOR several days after the advent of Jed into the camp-fire circle the girls scouted the country round about until, to quote Dorothy, they became familiar with every "stick and stone on the place."

And, oh, the fun they had—fishing on the banks of the stream in cool, shady nooks with the sun flickering through in tiny patches on the moss-covered ground—swimming—tramping—canoeing—all the healthy sports in which our sturdy American girls find such delight.

The girls had been anxious to visit the islands, but Miss Howland had remained firm in her decision not to attempt the trip until the girls had become expert in handling their canoes. "For," she had explained to them in reply to their impatience, "if anything should happen to any one of you, I should count myself responsible and never hold up my head again for the rest of my life. So you see we must take no chances."

However, at their last canoe practice they had han-

dled their little crafts so skilfully that Miss Howland had declared they might venture to visit the islands sometime during the following week.

On this particular morning a new excitement filled the camp. Jim had run down for one of his promised visits and had made the astounding assertion that a new camp had been started just that morning on the other side of the river.

A new camp! The thought gave rise to a hundred eager conjectures. "What do they look like?" "How many are there?" "Who is their leader?" and a hundred like questions were fired at Jim until he stood there, puzzled and confused, looking dazedly from one to the other and rubbing his shock of sandy hair as if by that means he might collect his bewildered wits and set his brain to working. Miss Howland, noting his confusion, broke into the conversation.

"Perhaps," she said with an amused smile, "if you girls would ask your questions one at a time, Jim would be better able to answer them."

But this suggestion of their guardian's proved impracticable, for each girl was anxious to put her question first, which, it will be easily understood, caused more trouble than before. It was Lucile who finally

solved the problem by suggesting that Miss Howland ask the questions.

The latter laughingly agreed to this, saying that she had been interested to see how long it would take them to reach this sensible conclusion.

When at last the cross-questioning was over, they gathered that there were twelve girls in the opposing camp, that their leader's name was Miss Stevens, that they had arrived that morning and, as far as Jim knew, they intended to stay for the season.

"But, Jim, what do they look like?" insisted Jessie, when they had absorbed this information.

"As to that, miss," Jim replied with a grin, "I'm sure I can't say, not bein' what ye might call a judge of the ladies."

"But did they look nice," she insisted, "like us, for instance?"

"Goodness, Jessie, you don't think anything of yourself, do you?" Marjorie scoffed.

"Did they?" Jessie repeated, ignoring the interruption.

"Why, yes, it seems to me they did," Jim answered, giving the matter as grave consideration as if it had been of life or death importance.

"Y-yes, I should say they looked like very nice young ladies."

Just then Jed came rollicking up to his erstwhile master still wet from his swim, for although he was so young a dog, he could swim as well as any of the girls.

"Hello, Jed," cried Jim, boisterously greeting his old playmate, evidently relieved to find himself again on familiar ground. "Ye're sure gettin' to be a big feller. Jed, boy," as the dog circled around, barking joyfully and making little, ineffectual dabs at Jim's feet, "why, I declare, ye seem almost glad to see yer old friend. Come here an' tell me what ye been doin' since I see ye last."

But he was not to be let off so easily, for the girls continued to ply him with questions, the answers to which he could not possibly under any conditions be expected to know, until Miss Howland put a stop to it all by reminding them that it was time for canoe practice.

For the first time since they had come into possession of the canoes, they reluctantly turned to the practice.

However, they soon became interested and did so

well that Miss Howland admitted a great improvement.

"You are doing splendidly, girls," she commended them, heartily, "and I am now positively sure that we can visit the island next week. Perhaps if the improvement continues, we'll be able to make the trip even sooner than I planned."

Thus encouraged the girls went to their work with redoubled energy and for the time almost forgot the new camp.

After lunch Lucile and her squad, consisting of Jessie, Dorothy and Evelyn, started for the village for the necessary provisions.

It was a beautiful day and the girls, always glad of any excuse that took them through the woods, prepared for their walk right merrily. Although by this time they were all familiar with the woodland sights and sounds, they never tired of them. The chattering of the squirrels among the trees, the monotonous tap-tap of the woodpecker, the plaintive cry of a Bob-White to his mate or the crack of a twig as a startled rabbit flashed by—all these were ever new and never failed to charm.

So, with every sense alert to the wonders about

them, our four girls swung along the path on the way to the village.

They had covered quite a stretch of ground when the rest were startled by an exclamation from Jessie, who had lingered in the rear to gather some wild flowers.

"Look," she cried, "here comes Jeddie, and we told him expressly to stay at home. Oh, you naughty dog," she cried, waving a threatening forefinger at the offender, who, we must reluctantly admit, seemed not a whit ashamed of himself. However, noticing that Jessie did not welcome his advances very kindly, he trotted up to Lucile, his tail beating the air violently and appeal in his imploring eyes.

"Oh, Jeddie, Jeddie," said Lucile in that more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger tone of voice that sent her hearers into gales of merriment, "do you think it's nice to follow us this way when I asked you to stay in camp?" Then suddenly her voice changed to stern reprimand and she turned on the little dog with a ferocity that made the girls jump. "Stop wagging your tail this minute, sir," she ordered. "You are a bad, mischievous, naughty dog, and just for disobeying me you won't be allowed to get into

a canoe *for a whole week!*" this last with terrible emphasis.

And never did little dog look more crestfallen and disconsolate as he turned away, with tail tucked between his legs, to obey Lucile's command to "go home." Twice he turned to look back imploringly, but always that inexorable finger pointed toward camp. At last, a picture of utter dejection, he circled a bush and was lost to view.

"Oh, Lucile, how could you?" Jessie began, but Lucile did not hear her, for she was already running down the path in the direction the little dog had taken.

"Jeddie, boy," she called, "come back! It's all right now. Come back!"

And around the corner came bounding a little dark streak that rushed up to Lucile joyfully, all out of breath and barking wildly.

Lucile picked him up and held him at arms' length, while he tried vainly to reach her face with his pink tongue.

"And did you really think I meant it, Jeddie?" asked Lucile fondly. "Of course you didn't. Oh, Jed, darling, I couldn't resist the temptation to scold

you—you did look so funny,” and she hugged the little dog until he gasped for breath.

The girls regarded their leader for a brief second in amazement and then, suddenly, it all seemed so funny that they laughed until the tears ran down their faces.

“Lucile, you ought to go on the stage,” said Dorothy between gasps. “I’ll never again believe that you’re in earnest about anything after the way you treated poor little Jed.”

“Oh, he doesn’t mind,” Lucile announced, calmly, as they started again. “Why, I scold him every once in a while just to see how funny he looks. He rather enjoys it—thinks it’s some kind of a new game.”

“Then you’ve been training him without saying anything to us?” Evelyn reproached her.

“I didn’t need to train him,” Lucile answered. “He’s just ‘nat’rally gifted,’ as Jim says.”

Soon they reached the village and were just entering the grocery store for the last provisions when Evelyn gripped Lucile by the arm.

“Look over there, Lucile,” she whispered. “Do you see those girls? I shouldn’t wonder if they belonged to the new camp. Look, there are two more

of them." And, sure enough, just emerging from the post-office were four girls, who were so evidently newcomers that the girls felt sure they were in some way connected with the new camp.

Lucile called to Jessie and Dorothy and they held a whispered conversation.

"I'm not sure whether Miss Howland would want us to or not, but it seems to me that it is our duty to speak to them."

"Our duty *and* our pleasure," put in Dorothy, slyly.

"Since we were here first," added Lucile, sending a withering glance in Dorothy's direction. "What do you think, girls?"

"Why, I think we ought to," Jessie answered, rather doubtfully.

"Of course we should," Evelyn decided in her business-like tone. "It's the only thing to do."

"And I'm sure Miss Howland would speak to them if she were here," Jessie added.

For another moment Lucile hesitated, undecided what to do. She knew that her guardian contemplated visiting the other camp in a few days; for although it was not a camp-fire, Miss Howland wished to be on friendly terms with her neighbors, and it was barely

possible that she would think it presumption on Lucile's part to interfere.

She was spared any further uncertainty, for even as she came to her decision, the girls on the post-office steps advanced in their direction. When they came within speaking distance, Lucile addressed the girl who was a little in advance of the others.

"Aren't you from the new camp?" she asked.

"Yes," replied the girl. "And you belong to the camp-fire Aloea that everybody is talking about, don't you?"

Lucile answered in the affirmative and introduced herself and the other girls. When Alice Hague, for that was the first girl's name, had done the same for her friends, the girls fell at once to comparing notes.

"Do you like it over your side of the river?" Jessie questioned as they entered the store to finish their marketing.

"Indeed we do," answered one of the girls enthusiastically. "I never knew there was such a beautiful place in the world until we came here. Of course we haven't had time to look about us much yet," she added.

"But Miss Stevens has given us to-day and to-mor-

row," Alice explained, "to scour around before we settle down to any regular work."

"Yes," said another, "but the more we see the more we want to see. It will take us several days at this rate to find out all we want to."

"But we have been here over a week now," Evelyn remarked, "and we haven't begun to see things yet. At that rate it's going to take us all summer."

The girls laughed, and one of them noticing Jed for the first time, exclaimed, "Isn't that a cute dog? Does it belong to you?"

"Yes," Lucile acknowledged fondly. "And he's one of the best little dogs that ever lived—and the funniest," she added, with a sly glance at her companions.

"Isn't he a darling?" said Alice, as she took Jed in her arms. "I shouldn't mind having one like him myself. He's a water dog, isn't he?"

"Uh-huh," Lucile answered. "We take him all over in the canoes and he can swim as far as you can throw a stick from the shore."

The girls marveled at this and Jed was likely to become more spoiled than ever with all the attention showered upon him.

When they had made all their purchases, the girls

from both camps walked together to the bend of the road where they would have to separate. So interested were the girls of the new camp in the adventures of our camp-fire girls that they found themselves still talking when the gathering dusk warned them that it was long after the time set for their return.

Reluctantly they parted, but not without promises on both sides to meet again.

Alice stopped at the bend of the road to call back over her shoulder, "you *will* be sure to come, won't you?"

And our girls sang back, merrily, "Don't worry about that. You couldn't keep us away."

"Come, girls, we'll have to hurry," said Lucile. "I'm afraid Miss Howland will be worried."

"Oh, but isn't it great to have those girls so near?" cried Jessie, following her own train of thought. "We ought to have whole loads of fun."

"I guess we ought," said Evelyn; "they seem to be such nice girls, too. How did you like them, Jeddie?"

The girls had formed the habit of asking Jed his opinion on various subjects, just to see him look wise and wag his tail knowingly as if to say, "Quite right, I agree with you." But this time for answer he gave

a sharp bark and made a dash for a little gray squirrel that scurried across the path almost under his nose.

A moment later the squirrel was perched on a low branch, scolding violently, with Jed making ineffectual leaps at the quarry, sometimes landing on his feet, but more often on his nose.

"Jed, don't be silly," cried Lucile. "You'll have your poor little nose bumped off if you don't stop."

Jed immediately desisted, and solaced himself by chasing an attractive butterfly. When it alighted on a bush near by, he made a dash for it, and when, with a lazy motion of its wings, it flew beyond his reach, he looked so puzzled and distressed that the girls fairly ached with laughter.

"Oh, Jeddie, Jeddie, you're more fun than a circus!" cried Evelyn.

Needless to say, they reached camp a good deal later than usual, and the girls surrounded them, demanding to know where they had been.

"We'll have to tell Miss Howland first," said Lucile, and ran off to make confession.

"You did wrong to stay so long," said Miss Howland, when she had listened attentively to the recital. "But you were perfectly justified in addressing the

girls, since you were the first comers. In fact, you couldn't have done anything else."

"That's almost exactly what Evelyn said," Lucile admitted; "but I was afraid you might not like it."

Although the girls were eager to hear the news at once, Miss Howland reminded them that the place for reports was the camp-fire, and so they had to wait till then with what patience they could muster.

After supper the camp-fire was kindled and one by one the girls seated themselves around it. Impatiently they waited while Miss Howland called the roll and the girls made their reports of the duties and pleasures that had made up their day.

When at last Lucile was called and asked for her report, the girls drew a long sigh of relief and leaned forward, expectantly.

Lucile told the story at length, not even omitting Jed's part in it, and she soon had the girls in gales of laughter.

"Oh, I wish we could go to-morrow," said Marjorie, when the tale was finished. "I think I'd like those girls."

Soon afterward they sang their closing song and walked away in couples toward their tents, talking

animatedly about "what they would do with the campers."

After they had all gone Lucile and Jessie lingered to put out the fire and leave everything in order.

For a moment before they smothered the glowing embers they stood side by side, arm in arm, gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

To them came the faint cry of night birds and the gentle lap of ripples as they broke upon the bank. Now and then a twig cracked and a flame darted weirdly up into the shadows.

"It's just as we dreamed it would be," Jessie whispered.

"Only better," Lucile agreed, as she stooped to cover the glowing coals with ashes.

CHAPTER IX

"MANY A SLIP"

LUCILE had at last reached her goal of torch-bearer. Her honor chain was long, and the beads had all the colors of the rainbow. There were blue beads, won by her extensive knowledge of nature lore. She had studied very patiently and faithfully under Miss Howland's tutelage, and now had reaped her reward. Side by side with the blue were the red beads, silent testimonials of her perfect health, and these were interspersed with others of green and brown. But those that she most prized were her flame-beads, symbols of homecraft. Once, just before they had left for Mayaro, her father had put his arms around her fondly and called her his "little house-keeper." How happy and proud she had been that day, almost happier, she told herself, than on this day of days, as she lay with sleepy eyes fixed upon the river.

"Lucy, are you awake?" called Jessie, softly.

"Yes, have been for the last half hour," answered Lucile.

"So have I," yawned Jessie. "What have you been doing all this time?"

"Oh, just lying here being happy and trying to realize my good luck."

"It must seem great to you," said Jessie. "Here I've only got honors enough to call myself a fire-maker, and yet I feel all funny."

"Funny," echoed Lucile, raising herself on her elbow and gazing questioningly at her friend. "What do you mean, funny?"

"Oh, just that," explained Jessie, vaguely; "kind of creepy and chilly, don't you know."

"Better take my blanket," suggested Lucile. "It may be chills and fever coming on."

"It's no joke," Jessie complained. "I should think you'd sympathize with me, instead of getting sarcastic right away."

"I can't any more than offer you the blanket," said Lucile, as she threw off the covers and got up.

"What are you doing?" asked Jessie, stretching her neck to bring Lucile within her range of vision, as she fumbled with something in the corner.

"I'm getting out my ceremonial dress and the moccasins," was the answer. "Oh, here's my headdress. I was afraid I might have left it home."

"Get mine out while you're about it, won't you?" asked Jessie.

"You'd better get it yourself," Lucile advised. "If you're going to get lazy again on the very day that you're to be made fire-maker, Miss Howland may think better of it and keep the bracelet."

Jessie got up with alacrity.

"All right, if you're so mean—say, Lucy, did you forget we were to see the island to-day?" and she paused with her bag half-open to gaze at her friend.

"So we are," cried Lucile, joyfully. "Oh, Jessie, it's going to be a wonderful day," and she hugged her companion ecstatically.

"Look, here's my count," she said, a moment later, bringing up a big brown book. "We've been so busy that I haven't had time to fill it all out."

"Here's mine, too," said Jessie. "Let's look them over together."

So they sat down on the soft grass outside the tent and reveled in memories, until the sound of voices warned them that it was time for their dip.

After that all was bustle and preparation. About ten o'clock they placed the baskets of provisions in the canoes, and were just ready to follow when Lucile cried:

“Where's Jed? I don't remember having seen him this morning.”

“Yes, and we want to take him with us to-day of all days,” added Margaret.

As if in answer, Jim broke through the bushes and ran down to the water's edge. Immediately he was assailed with questions as to whether he had seen Jed and where he was.

“They're trying to ask you if you've seen anything of Jed,” Miss Howland interpreted. “We wanted to take him with us this morning, but he seems to have disappeared.”

“You must have seen him,” said Marjorie, hopefully.

“Well, you see, miss, the truth is,” he began, and then stopped, as though not knowing how to proceed. “Well,” he blurted, “I saw Jed back yonder and I reckon he's purty sick.”

“Sick,” chorused the girls in dismay, staring at Jim unbelievably.

"Yes," the boy maintained stoutly, "old Jed is purty sick when he don't know his own master what sets sich a pow'ful store by him," and here he choked and seemed greatly interested in the rim of his old straw hat.

Miss Howland put her hand gently on his shoulder.

"I don't think there can be much the matter with Jed," she said, soothingly. "He's probably just feeling a little under the weather on account of the heat. But," she added, a little anxious frown between her eyes, "if there's the slightest danger of rabies, though I don't suppose there is in so young a dog, we ought to have him tied."

"No, don't do that please, miss," the boy cried, earnestly. "There's no danger, I'm sure, and I'd rather not tie him up if you don't mind. I'll take care of him till you get back."

"Oh, but we wanted to take him along so much!" Jessie exclaimed, disappointedly. "Now half the fun will be spoiled."

"Nothing of the sort," Lucile cried, gaily. "It's too bad Jeddie can't go, and we're all awfully sorry that he's sick, but as long as we can't have him, we might as well make the best of it."

"Lucile is right," said Miss Howland. "What can't be cured must be endured. I'm sure there's nothing serious the matter with the dog anyway," she added, turning to Jim. "He'll be all right when it gets cooler."

"I hope so, miss, only it hurts not to have him know me. I guess he'll be all right, though," he added, cheerily, and a few minutes later waved good-bye to the little fleet, as it glided out on the smooth water.

Then with a sigh he turned and retraced his steps, wearily, toward the shade of the forest. When he reached the spot where the little dog lay, he sat down beside him among the leaves.

"You're better off'n me, Jeddie," he murmured aloud to his unconscious comrade; "you're better off'n me, boy, cause you'll always have some one to love you as long as you live, for the beautiful lady is goin' to take you home with her, Jeddie, and you're all I have. But they've left you with me to-day, boy," he said, leaning over to stroke the curly black head, "an' I'm goin' to make the most of it. Just you an' me alone, Jeddie."

For a while the girls were sobered a trifle, but it

was not long before the incident was entirely forgotten in the novelty of their new experience.

The reflection of the sun in the water fairly dazzled them, but the intense heat they had felt on land seemed to lessen somewhat as they got farther from shore, and a soft breeze gently stirred the surface of the stream. To the overheated girls the change was very grateful, and they bent to their paddles with even more energy than before.

"If I weren't so anxious to get to the islands," Marjorie called across to Lucile, "I'd be enjoying this more."

"Why not enjoy both," answered Lucile. "I believe in making the most of the present, although I'm prepared to have all the fun there is when we reach the island."

"Listen to the philosopher," Jessie laughed.

"She's right just the same," Evelyn defended. "Enjoy the present and let the future take care of itself. That's what my Dad says."

"Well, the future's nearly here now," chimed in Margaret, pointing to the island which they were fast approaching, "so you'd better enjoy the present while you can. You won't have much more time to row."

A few minutes more and they had reached their destination. After trying for a landing several times, they finally succeeded in locating a small inlet that seemed just made for the purpose.

As Miss Howland stepped out on a rock that offered safe footing, such a cheer went up as that lone place had never heard before. So enthusiastic were the girls that Miss Howland had to remind them to be careful or they would upset the canoes and have a premature ducking.

At this admonition they subdued their overflowing spirits sufficiently to enable them all to land safely. And after the canoes had once been drawn upon the shore, they turned for their first good look about them.

It is impossible to describe the indescribable. So it is hard to picture this island, this favored garden spot of nature that fairly pulsed with exuberant life and beauty. The giant trees bent beneath the weight of their foliage, and their great arms locked and interlocked over the verdant ground beneath. So low did some of the branches droop that they almost touched the ground and mingled with the undergrowth that sprang up to meet them. Through the screen thus formed could be caught glimpses of a gentle ascent,

with here and there an immense rock outlined in bold relief against the darker background.

The air was filled with the music of a thousand birds pouring out the gladness of their hearts. Mingled with the melody was the soft cadence of tiny rills hurrying on to join the river. Nature, dressed in trailing robes of beauty, reached out her hands to them in gracious greeting and smiled a radiant welcome.

As the girls took in the wonder of the surroundings, they felt to the full the spell of the place, and for a long minute they stood in awed silence. But this could not last long, for their hearty, fun-loving natures were easily irked by restraint of any kind, and Evelyn broke the spell by exclaiming:

"Isn't it *great*, girls? Oh, I'm just dying to climb that hill and find out what's at the top."

"So am I," replied Lucile, "but I'm sure I don't see how we are going to do it. Look at those branches and vines and shrubs all tangled up together. How do you suppose we can make our way through, Miss Howland?"

Up to this time their guardian had said not a word, for she had been too interested in watching the effect

produced by the island on her young charges; but, being thus appealed to by Lucile, she roused herself.

“It is impossible to break through there,” she said. “The underbrush is too dense and the vines are so strong that we’d need an axe. There is a path back farther, though, that leads up the hill and all we have to do is to follow the bank until we come to it.”

“But I didn’t know you had been here before, Miss Howland,” said Margaret, looking up at her guardian wonderingly.

“Yes, I’ve often visited the island with a guide so that I know almost every stick and stone on it. Come, girls, follow your leader and we’ll soon find the path,” and she led the way, merrily.

Lucile and Jessie lingered a little behind the rest, as they had elected to help Margaret over the fallen logs and large rocks that often obstructed the way.

With ever increasing gaiety, as they became more accustomed to the place, the girls followed their guardian, scrambling over obstacles and taking little account of the bruises and scratches that occasionally claimed their toll.

Soon they came to a small clearing, and Miss Howland said she thought it would be best to leave their

baskets there while they scouted the island. This they were only too glad to do, for the baskets were heavy and impeded their progress.

"Oh, that feels good," said Evelyn, as she deposited her load on a convenient rock and stretched her cramped fingers. "You can't have any fun when you have to drag along a thing like that."

"I have an idea that you'll be glad to dispose of the contents a little later, though," Miss Howland laughed.

"Probably," Lucile agreed. "In fact," eyeing the basket, hungrily, "I wouldn't very much object to sampling it now."

"Isn't it most lunch time?" put in Jessie, hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," answered her guardian. "It's splendid to have such good appetites, but I'll guarantee that they will be even better two hours from now, when we've had a chance to look about us."

"I don't want to eat now, anyway," Marjorie declared. "I'd be too excited and anxious to see more of this great little island."

"Oh, girls, look," cried Evelyn, from her precarious perch on the very edge of a rock. "Do you see that?"

pointing to a queerly-shaped boat about half a mile off shore. “I never saw one like that before. What do you suppose it is?”

The girls crowded round and looked in the direction she indicated.

“It looks like a sort of canoe and rowboat combined,” Marjorie began, when Miss Howland broke in:

“Come away from the edge, Evelyn,” she commanded. “The rock is slippery and it wouldn’t do you any good to tumble in the river.”

But, alas! advice sometimes comes too late, and even as Evelyn turned to obey, her foot slipped and she half fell, half slid down the steep bank into the water.

With a cry of dismay the girls rushed to the edge and looking down beheld their fallen comrade standing in water to her waist and shaking the drops from her eyes and hair, “for all the world like Jeddie after a swim,” Dorothy declared.

So relieved were they to find her safe instead of badly hurt, as they had feared, that all they could do was to stand and gaze until Miss Howland and Evelyn herself stirred them to action.

“Come, girls,” cried the former; “you can’t do any

good by standing there like mummies. Let's form a chain and haul her up."

No sooner said than done. Miss Howland held firmly to a tree while the girls stretched out in a human chain down the bank, until the last one could reach Evelyn's hand and drag her up.

When she was at last landed safe and sound on solid ground again, the girls couldn't help laughing at the picture she presented. Half sheepish, half defiant, and wholly wet and bedraggled, she stood before them, as though awaiting judgment.

"Oh, it's all very well for you to laugh," she exclaimed, in an injured tone, as the girls sought to repress their rising mirth, "but it isn't as funny as it looks. I'm very sorry, Miss Howland," she added; "I was just going to come away, but——"

"Your foot slipped," finished Miss Howland, while her eyes twinkled.

"Oh, you did look so funny," Lucile gasped, not able to hold in any longer. "If I'd only had a camera—if I only had—oh—oh——" and they all laughed until the tears ran down their cheeks, and Evelyn, looking at them, had perforce to join them, even at her own expense.

"Well," she said, ruefully, when the girls had stopped from sheer exhaustion, "I shouldn't wonder if the joke *were* on me."

"It's lucky you had your bathing suit on anyway," remarked Lucile, philosophically, as they prepared to follow the path up the hill; "and you'll be nice and cool now for the rest of the day."

CHAPTER X

IT'S FAIRYLAND!

FOR nearly an hour they followed their guardian along the narrow, winding path, discovering a new wonder and delight at each step. Occasionally they stopped for a moment to rest, but curiosity acted as a spur and drove them on to fresh discovery.

At last they reached the top of the hill and stopped to admire the beautiful view, for the island was shaped like a pyramid, and from the apex, where the girls now stood, the ground sloped gently down, until a gleam of silver marked the water line. The island was so thickly wooded that the sun scarcely penetrated, except where, here and there, an errant sunbeam pitted its small light against the shadow. There was restful coolness in this spot when the world outside was parched with heat. Over all brooded an air of peace, a sense of unutterable quiet and drowsiness, as if Nature had fallen asleep, lulled by the music of her rills.

Lucile drew a long breath and reaching out her hand, touched Miss Howland's sleeve, as if to assure herself that this was real and not a trick of her imagination.

"I never saw anything like this except in a dream," she breathed, and then added, with a ruefulness that set all the girls to laughing, "I think I'm awake now, but I wish you girls would throw me into the river, just to make sure."

"No need of using such very drastic methods," laughed Miss Howland. "I can assure you that this is no dream island and neither are we dream people, but good, substantial human beings."

"Human beings generally have appetites," Jessie added, significantly. "And I'm no exception to the rule."

"Um, I *am* hungry," exclaimed Evelyn, just discovering that important fact. "When are we going to eat, Miss Howland?" she added, anxiously. "Isn't it most time, now?"

"Just about," answered the guardian, reassuringly. "I was just going to suggest that a squad go back and get the lunch for us, when you discovered that you were hungry."

"Oh, are we going to have our lunch here?" exclaimed Marjorie, rapturously. "I was hoping we could, but I didn't dare suggest it."

"But what squad are you going to send back, Miss Howland?" Lucile asked, eagerly.

"Why I thought I'd arrange it this way. While one squad brings the basket, the other two may prospect in the opposite direction, with your pocket compasses, of course, and while we are eating our lunch we'll tell about what we've discovered."

"That's great," Lucile exclaimed, with shining eyes, for nothing was more to her taste than a ramble through the tangle of vines and branches.

"I'm glad you like the idea," said Miss Howland, smiling. "Suppose you, Marjorie, and your girls follow the path back to the river and get the lunch that's an easy task."

Although not particularly relishing her part in the programme, Marjorie gave the salute and started off the way they had come.

"And you, Lucile, may take your squad and explore to the east for a distance of about a quarter of a mile, but don't go any farther or you can't hear the whistle. I shall lead the rest of you for the same distance west.

That is all, except to be sure to come at the first sound of the whistle."

Lucile saluted and plunged into the woods directly east, as pointed out by her compass.

"Goodness, I don't know how ever we're going to get through this tangle," she cried, a perplexed frown wrinkling her pretty forehead. "The vines are so tough you simply can't break them. The only thing to do is to lie down and wriggle through like snakes."

"I'd be much obliged if you wouldn't put me in the same class with the reptiles," Jessie interrupted. "You may so classify yourself, but as to me——"

"Oh, Jessie, please stop," begged Lucile, plaintively. "Isn't it bad enough to have to do something that can't be done, without being forced to listen to your foolishness? We can't go back to Miss Howland and the girls without finding out something," she continued, glancing despairingly about her to find an opening in the green tangle. "So the only thing we can do is to crawl under where we can't break through."

"Yes, but suppose we find a place where we can neither break through nor crawl under," suggested Evelyn, hopefully.

"In that case we'd have to go back and confess

failure, I suppose, but we don't want to cross any bridges before we come to them."

"I only wish we could find some bridges," mourned Ruth. "They'd be easier to get over than this."

"Well, come on, girls," cried Lucile with renewed energy, for nothing ever daunted her for long. "We'll have to make the best of a bad bargain. Lie down, every one of you and do just as I do."

So down they went, obediently, and followed their leader as she wriggled through the network of vines and came up on the other side, flushed and breathless, but triumphant.

"That was easy," she cried, as the last of them got to her feet. "After that we'll have courage to meet any old thing that comes along. You did look so funny, too," she added, with a chuckle at the recollection of red faces and flattened bodies with wildly kicking feet at the end.

"*You* needn't laugh," grumbled Jessie, "for you looked as funny from the back as any of us."

"Don't doubt it," came back, cheerfully. "Come on and see if there are any more vines to crawl under."

"Don't worry, there'll be plenty," Evelyn prophesied, gloomily.

"Say, Lucy," Ruth exclaimed, "are you going to tell Miss Howland and the girls about this?"

"Guess so, if nothing else happens. It's the only thing that approaches interest, so far."

So, merrily, they followed their dauntless leader, and although Evelyn's prediction was more than fulfilled, the girls pushed sturdily on, determined that they should have something to tell their guardian on their return.

Their persistence was amply rewarded, for as they pushed aside a peculiarly stubborn bit of foliage, such a vision met their astonished eyes as caused them to stop with mouth and eyes wide open.

"It's fairyland!" Evelyn cried. "Oh, Lucy, this can't be real."

"Yes it is," Lucile assured her. "Only it's the best thing we've seen yet. I guess we will have something to tell them now."

What they saw was this. Two rows of trees bent their intertwined branches to form the roof of a veritable woodland bower, while from the boughs hung lacy garlands of clinging vine. The floor was carpeted with rich, velvety moss and even the great rocks were clothed in velvet, while from the crevices

peeped forth myriads of wild flowers, lending their vivid color to the beauty of the whole. At the end, adding the last perfect touch to the exquisite picture, dashed and flashed and sang in silvery lightness a miniature waterfall. Fed from a spring near by, it came rushing along, laughing at the stones that obstructed its way and scattering its feathery spray upon the soft, velvet petals of the flowers.

"This surely is the best yet," cried Jessie, as they advanced farther into all this loveliness.

"Yes, and to think *we* were the ones to discover it!" said Evelyn.

Lucile stooped over to pluck one of the gorgeous blossoms from its sheltered nook beside a huge, protecting stone, but as her fingers touched the soft, yielding stem, she straightened with a cry of, "Oh, girls, I can't pick one of these beauties. Don't let's disturb them—we'll leave them all just as they are."

"That's what I was thinking," Jessie agreed, close at her friend's elbow. "It seems as if there are just enough, and if a flower were gone it would spoil the effect."

Evelyn had flung herself on a flat stone that formed a perfect seat. "Say, Lucile," she cried, "this is

absolutely *too* good. I wonder what Miss Howland would—what's that?" she interrupted herself, as a faint, far-away sound broke the stillness.

"It's the whistle, girls," cried Lucile. "It's too bad to leave our fairy grotto before we've had time to explore it but, 'needs must'——" here she stopped short and looked rather confused.

"Lucy," Evelyn reproved, in mock horror, "I'm surprised at such a quotation!"

"I didn't say anything," defended Lucile, defiantly, while all the girls laughed at her confusion.

"Never mind, Lucy," said Jessie, with an aggravatingly soothing air, "I'll stand by you, whatever happens."

"Thanks," said Lucile, laconically.

The girls reluctantly followed as she led the way back, but turned for a last look at their discovery before it was entirely hidden from view. Each in her heart vowed to return, and that very soon.

They found the return journey much easier and they came upon Miss Howland so soon that she was surprised and asked them how far they had gone.

"Oh, it wasn't quite a quarter of a mile," Lucile

answered. "Something stopped us before we could cover the whole distance."

"Tell us about it," they cried, but Miss Howland held up her hand.

"Wait till the lunch is spread," she admonished. "It's getting late and I thought you girls were hungry," she added, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Hungry! well I guess we are," cried Jessie, as the hamper was opened and disclosed the most tempting of provisions.

When everything was in readiness, Miss Howland gathered the girls around a flat stone that served admirably for a table.

"Now let's have your story, Lucy," Miss Howland invited, and the girls leaned forward in eager expectancy.

In a very few words Lucile told of their discovery and the girls almost forgot to eat in their interest.

"Oh!" Marjorie exclaimed, as she finished, "that's the most wonderful thing of all, Lucy. Why couldn't we have had the luck to find something like that."

"Did you know there was a place like that on the island, Miss Howland?" asked Lucile, suspiciously.

Miss Howland laughed. "Well, I had heard something about it," she admitted, "but I didn't know exactly in what part of the island it was situated."

"But you had an idea," guessed Marjorie, slyly. "And you sent Lucy in that direction. Now, to make it even, Miss Howland, you'll have to take the rest of us to see the wonderful place."

"Well, perhaps we will," Miss Howland half promised, indulgently.

The lunch was very quickly disposed of, and as soon as the last remnants were packed away, the merry company, led by their beloved guardian, set off in search of the reported wonderland.

It must be admitted that some there were who felt a trifle skeptical as to the absolute verity of the tale and had a sort of Missourian feeling that "they must be shown." Most of them took the recital in good faith, however, and pressed forward, heedless of scratches and turned ankles.

It was not long before they came in sight of the wonder, and as they stood and gazed about them, even the *most* skeptical declared that Lucile had not been half prodigal enough in her praise.

For a full hour they abandoned themselves to the

enjoyment of this beautiful spot. At first they played games, hiding behind the trees and moss-covered rocks. It was too hot to keep this up long, and one after another they threw themselves upon the ground dabbling their hands in the clear stream and flipping handfuls of spray at one another.

They could have gone on in this way indefinitely, taking no account of time, but Miss Howland was finally forced to warn them that the long afternoon was drawing to a close and that they must start at once.

"Oh, dear, why didn't we bring our supper, too," said Dorothy. "Then we wouldn't have had to go back so soon."

"Humph, that's a brilliant idea!" quoth Jessie. "Especially as you know we have to get back to camp before dark."

"Oh, and I'd almost forgotten we were going to have our council fire to-night," said Dorothy. "Now we *will* have to hurry!"

Miss Howland nodded approval. "I'm glad you realize that," she said, simply.

Although they were still sorry to leave their new discovery, the excitement of the approaching camp

council ran through their veins like fire, and made the parting easy.

When at last they reached the canoes and set off for home, the sun was fast nearing the horizon. Now that they had left the island behind them, the realization struck them with overwhelming force that this was the night on which the council fire was to be held and the long-coveted ranks were to be given.

Almost simultaneously the girls quickened the stroke and fixed eager eyes on the opposite shore.

"I had almost forgotten," Jessie whispered to Lucile, as she drew along side. "To-night the ranks are to be given. Did *you* forget, Lucy?"

"No, I didn't forget," Lucile answered in a tone that caused her friend to turn sharply. For Lucile's lips were tightly compressed and in either cheek burned a crimson flush. Her whole body was tense, and the short, hard strokes of her paddle sent the canoe forward so rapidly that Jessie had all she could do to keep up with her.

"Um," murmured Jessie, with an appreciative nod. "She's beginning to realize now what a great thing is about to happen. I'd be excited, too, if I were in her place."

And once again the tense, eager excitement that had been momentarily dispelled by the island atmosphere of peace and quiet claimed the girls for its own. Many were the surreptitious glances in Lucile's direction, and in their hearts the girls wondered what it must be like to be so near the greatest honor a camp-fire girl can win. Then and there each one promised herself that she would never cease trying until she was in the place Lucile occupied to-night. Although Marjorie and Evelyn were disappointed and chagrined at being out-raced to the goal, their failure now only made them more determined to win out in the future.

"Is that shore coming nearer?" cried Dorothy to Evelyn, in desperation. "For the last five minutes it seems to have been getting farther away!"

"Oh, it's getting nearer I guess, although it does seem as if we'd taken twice as long already as we did to reach the island," answered Evelyn, and then added, musingly, "I can imagine how Lucile feels now. I hope I'll be there some day myself."

"Of course you will," Marjorie assured her, loyally, and they paddled on in silence.

At last the canoes were safely docked and the girls

set to work quickly to prepare dinner. They ate comparatively little that evening, for the food seemed to choke them and they could think of nothing but the council fire.

As soon as the meal was over Miss Howland dismissed them and they ran hurriedly to their tents, to don the ceremonial dress.

Then the moment came when, one by one, soft-footed and noiseless, they approached the yet unlighted camp-fire, before which Miss Howland in her ceremonial dress was standing, a motionless, picturesque figure against the fast-darkening gray of the sky.

As they filed past their guardian each girl made the hand sign of fire and then took her seat in the circle. When they were all seated Miss Howland obtained a spark by rubbing two pieces of flint together, thus igniting a torch. With the torch held high, she advanced toward the wood and the girls held their breath as the dry timber began to catch and sent the sparks glancing here and there. Satisfied that the fire was making good headway, Miss Howland stepped back and took her seat.

Then softly, solemnly, to the accompaniment of

crackling wood and hissing flame, the maidens of the camp Aloea chanted their ode to Fire.

Oh, Fire!

Long years ago, when our fathers fought with great animals, you were their protection.

From the cruel cold of winter you saved them.

When they needed food you changed the flesh of beasts into savory meat for them.

During all the ages your mysterious flame has been a symbol to them for Spirit.

So (to-night) we light our fire in remembrance of the Great Spirit who gave you to us.

As their voices died away the flames rose higher and higher until the water near the bank became all stained with red and fantastic shadows that leaped and danced among the trees.

Then came their guardian's voice, softly calling each girl's musical Indian name and receiving in return her whispered, "Kolah."

So the ceremony progressed until the three new girls had received their rings and Jessie rose to repeat the fire-maker's desire. And never was girl so proud and happy as Jessie when she held out her arm for the bracelet she had worked so hard to deserve.

Then it was Lucile's turn, and Miss Howland ad-

dressed the girls. "I need scarcely tell you how hard Nadia has striven to merit the honor which is hers to-night. Not only has she won all the required honors, but she has proved herself a natural and enthusiastic leader. The girls she has led have improved rapidly and I know we all feel that she is a fit candidate for the highest honor it is possible for a camp-fire girl to receive." She turned to Lucile, who had risen from her place and now stood facing her guardian.

The heart of every girl went out to her as she stood there, with the red glow of the fire playing over her face and the firelight a gleam in her dark hair, making it shine like burnished copper. Her eyes were flashing with excitement and her figure was tense and motionless as she awaited Miss Howland's next words.

"Nadia," began her guardian, "Nadia, is it your desire to become a torch-bearer of the Camp-Fire Aloea?"

Nadia answered in the affirmative and then slowly repeated,

"That light that has been given to me
I desire to pass, undimmed, to others."

It was over. Slowly the girls filed out from the light of the fire into the lights and shadows beyond.

As Lucile entered her tent two arms were thrown about her in a bear-like hug and a tender voice whispered in her ear, "Oh, Lucy, dear, I'm *so* glad."

"And I'm so very, very glad for you, Jessie," she whispered, returning the hug with interest. "I don't think I could believe it even now, if I didn't have this to prove it," and she touched the pin on her dress.

And then the tent flap was pushed aside and little Margaret Stillman, discarding her crutch, threw herself on her knees beside Lucile and clasped two slender arms about her waist.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she cried, half sobbing with joy. "I've wanted it so long and now that it's come, I'm the happiest, the very happiest girl in the world."

"I'm not so sure of that," murmured Lucile, gently, as she gazed out over Margaret's bowed head toward the open where the last tiny flame of the council fire flickered for an instant and went out.



"THAT LIGHT THAT HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME I DESIRE TO PASS,
UNDIMMED, TO OTHERS."

CHAPTER XI

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

EARLY the next morning Lucile opened her eyes with the distinct impression that something unusual and rather nice had happened.

Gradually, as she became more and more awake, this feeling deepened until she suddenly remembered the events of the previous evening. And with lazy, absolute contentment she gazed out upon the brilliant sunshine of another perfect day. Happily she reviewed all the incidents of the day before, from the canoe trip to the island up to the council fire, and a tender smile crossed her face as she thought of Jessie and little Margaret Stillman.

"How long it seems since yesterday morning," she mused. "Then I was only a fire-maker and now I am a torch-bearer, second only to Miss Howland herself. I'll tell Jeddie"—and then she suddenly started, as it flashed through her mind that she had not seen the little dog since the morning before and that they had left him sick and forlorn.

"Oh," she cried at this point in her meditations, "how could I forget all about him so? I wonder how—but Jim will be here this morning anyway, and then we can find out how he is."

Somewhat reassured by this reflection, she once more abandoned herself to pleasant recollections, and was smiling happily to herself when she was aroused by Jessie's voice:

"'Sleep, Lucy?' it inquired and then went on without waiting for an answer. "Say, how does it feel?"

"I'm just beginning to find out," Lucile answered. "How does it feel to you?"

"Haven't even had time to begin to find out," said Jessie, stifling a yawn, "but I have a sort of an idea that it's going to be great when I get used to it."

"I just thought of Jeddie a little while ago," remarked Lucile, "and I was wondering whether he was all right by this time."

"If he was with Jim all day yesterday he'll be right as a trivet this morning. We'll know all about him soon anyway," said Jessie, hopefully. "To change the subject, Lucy, do you know whether there is anything special on hand for to-day?"

"I'm not positive, but Miss Howland spoke about

visiting the other camp some day soon. I don't know whether she'll choose to-day or not."

"Oh, I hope she does!" exclaimed Jessie, impulsively. "I've been so anxious ever since the day we met them at the post-office to see the girls again."

"So have I," Lucile agreed, "but meanwhile it's time to get up. Do you realize that this is your first day as a fire-maker? You can lie in bed if you want to, but I mean to make the most of this day. There, the girls are already turning out and we surely don't want to be behind them."

So quickly they put on their suits and soon were part of the merry mob racing light-heartedly down to the water.

A quarter of an hour later dripping wet, but with rosy faces and eyes that danced and sparkled with health, they drew themselves up on the bank.

"Let's have a race," suggested Evelyn, struck by a happy thought. "We can all line up here at the water's edge and race for the big tree this side of the mess tent."

"No sooner said than done, Evelyn," cried Marjorie. "Come on, girls, get in line and I'll beat you all."

"Look who thinks she can run," Lucile derided. "We'll just have to show her how mistaken she is."

"All right, come on and try," she challenged, merrily, and then in a military voice commanded: "On your mark—get set—go."

And they were off like rabbits scuttling to the shelter of a burrow.

With all the speed they could muster the girls raced along, leaping over the few roots and low stumps in the way and seeing only the tree near the mess tent. Lucile would have made the goal first had she not caught her foot in an almost invisible root and been thrown forward. With a great effort she recovered her balance, just in time to see Marjorie throw herself against the tree with an exultant gasp.

"I won," she cried. "You said I couldn't, Lucy, but—why, what's the matter?" she exclaimed, all solicitude in a moment. "Did you hurt your foot? Oh, I'm sorry!"

"Nothing to speak of," replied Lucile. "I turned my ankle a trifle, that's all."

"It was really your race then, Lucy," cried Marjorie, generously. "You were way in the lead till you got hurt."

"Yes, Lucile had it easily," Jessie commented.

"It doesn't make any difference," Lucile disclaimed, stoutly; "Marjorie won and I didn't. That's all that counts. It's awfully nice of you though, Margie," she added.

"Does it hurt very much, now?" asked Margaret, anxiously.

"Not a bit. Nothing hurts to-day. Come on along, it's almost time for breakfast," and she led the way with a scarcely perceptible limp.

They had hardly finished eating when a bark sounded from the woods, and they all tumbled out to meet the one missing member of the camp.

There was a rush, and a flying black ball leaped into Lucile's outstretched arms and was held there, wriggling and twisting in a vain attempt to reach her face.

"Oh, you darling, you darling," she cried, hugging him tight. "You're all right again, aren't you, little doggie? Oh, I'm so glad to get you back."

"But where is Jim?" Miss Howland inquired as she stroked the shiny black head.

"There he is!" exclaimed Evelyn as Jim, red of face and breathing hard, ran out from the shadow of the trees.

"Oh, you've got him," he cried with a relieved gasp. "A nice chase ye've led me, ye little rascal," apostrophizing Jed, who wriggled himself free from Lucile's grasp and capered wildly about him.

"You see," Jim continued, "the minute we headed this way Jed broke loose and I've been chasin' him ever since. Oh, I ought to chop your head off with the axe they keep down the cellar," he said with a ferocity that was belied by the gentle way he pulled the culprit's silky ears.

"Huh, I don't believe you'd hurt a fly," Evelyn scoffed.

"Maybe not, miss," Jim agreed, with a grin.

"You surely did fix up the dog in fine shape," Miss Howland complimented, with a smile. "Yesterday he seemed pretty sick, but to-day he's as fit as a fiddle. You must be a magician."

"Not quite that, miss," disclaimed Jim, modestly. "It was just the heat, and he's not used to it. I kept him in a cool spot all day yesterday, and this morning he was as well as ever. I've got to go now, miss," he added, fingering his old hat nervously. "They'll be wanting me soon."

"All right, we won't keep you, Jim. Oh, thank you for the dog," she called out after him as he disappeared.

"Don't mention it," came back through the trees, and then the girls all fell on Jed and carted him down to the river.

As soon as they let him go he dashed into the water and was back again, shaking himself and looking expectantly from one to the other.

"Oh, he wants us to throw him a stick," cried Lucile, as she picked up a twig. "Here goes, Jed," and she threw it far out from the shore.

The dog was after it like a streak and plowing steadily along grasped it between his jaws and was back in a flash to the shore, where he laid the trophy at Lucile's feet. He shook the water from his coat and ran excitedly back and forth, begging for other worlds to conquer.

Time and time again the girls sent him in, until at last Lucile declared that they ought to stop.

"See, he's panting now," she said, "and we don't want to tire him too much."

"I'll just send this one more," and before they could stop her, Jessie had hurled a stick far out on the sur-

face, and Jed, not to be daunted, started out to bring it back.

"Oh, Jessie, you shouldn't have done that!" Lucile exclaimed. "Couldn't you see how tired he was?"

"I guess he's good for one more," Jessie answered, carelessly, to cover her real concern. "He wouldn't have chased it if he'd been so tired as you seem to think."

But Jed's stout little heart was stronger than his body. As he struggled along he seemed scarcely able to breast the tide, and to the anxious girls it looked as though he were sinking.

"Oh, we've got to help him," cried Margaret. "Look, look, his nose went under then," and before any one realized what she had in mind, or could stop her, she had flung her crutch into her canoe and scrambled in herself. Seizing the paddle, she pushed off from shore.

Quick as a flash Lucile acted. With desperate energy she tugged at the knotted line that held her canoe, and when it was at last freed she fell into it and was off, the short sharp strokes making the frail craft fairly fly. Breathlessly the girls watched.

Jed was in dire need of help, for only by the exer-

cise of all his waning strength could he keep his nose above water. But still his staunch little soul revolted at returning without the stick. They, his friends, had meant for him to bring it back, or they would not have thrown it. He must carry out his orders, and so, struggling, panting, he pushed on gallantly. Only a little way farther and he would reach it. Only a little way, but how interminable it seemed! On the little dog went, with aching muscles and his breath coming in short gasps, sometimes with his nose entirely under water, but always getting a little nearer to that bobbing stick of wood.

At last he had it clutched firmly between his teeth and started to go back. At the same instant Margaret gave her canoe a final push that brought her within reach of the foundering dog.

"Oh, you poor little thing!" she cried, as she saw his condition. "Just a second and I'll have you in."

"Margaret, don't do that!" Lucile almost screamed as she came within a yard of the other canoe. "Sit still and I'll get him."

But the warning came too late. In her eagerness to rescue, Margaret had leaned too far over the side, and the unstable craft suddenly tipped. Desperately,

she flung herself toward the other side, but the water was already flooding it, and with a cry of terror she went down, the waters closing over her.

Suffocating, choking, blinded, she came to the surface and thrashed about wildly. For a second or two she kept herself afloat, but her crippled state was too great a handicap. Sobbing, wrestling, fighting like a wild thing, she once more went down in the swirling, pitiless waters. There was a pounding in her ears like the roar of a thousand cannon, and then unconsciousness claimed her.

Frantic with terror, Lucile drove her canoe over the spot where Margaret had disappeared. With the speed of light, she was over the side, her body cleaving the green depths like an arrow. But she caught no glimpse of the form she sought and a terrible fear tugged at her heart as she rose to the surface.

"Oh Margaret, Margaret!" she cried, wildly, "where are you, dear? Oh, what shall I do, what can I do?"

Once more she dived, and this time she caught sight of a white face only a few feet away. Another instant and she had clutched the figure desperately and rose with her unconscious burden to the surface.

Holding Margaret's head above the water she swam to the canoe floating idly five yards away.

"Thank God, oh, thank God," she murmured, as she grasped the stern of the little craft with one hand, while with the other arm she held Margaret close to her side.

It was utterly impossible for her to lift the unconscious girl into the boat, or to get in herself without relinquishing her burden. But others were working now with the energy of desperation.

"Hold on tight, Lucile," called a voice that she recognized, and the next moment a canoe containing Miss Howland and Evelyn shot alongside.

It was the work only of a moment to lift Margaret into the canoe, and they were about to do the same for Lucile, when she intervened.

"Don't wait for me," she begged. "I'm perfectly safe and I'll swim in all right. Every minute's precious now for Margaret."

Miss Howland hesitated for an instant, but as she caught sight of Jessie pulling toward them, yielded to the greater need and paddled swiftly to the shore.

Events had passed so swiftly and Lucile's thoughts had been absorbed in her companion's danger,

that, although she had been dimly conscious of an object pressing against her shoulder, she had not realized what it was. Now as she turned she heard a little whimpering and saw the ends of two black paws that were holding to the upper part of her arm.

"Jed!" she exclaimed, "you little darling." And she shifted the little wet ball to a more secure position on her shoulder.

"Yes, it's Jed, all right," said Jessie, as she shipped her paddle and drew her canoe up close to Lucile's. "I saw him grab you as you swam past and hold on for dear life. Hand him over to me. And as for you, you blessed thing, just hold on to the stern with one hand and your canoe with the other, and I'll paddle you in before you know it."

A few minutes brought them to the shore, where they joined their companions, who were working feverishly over the unconscious form of Margaret.

For more than half an hour they labored with frantic energy to bring forth some sign of life. Now and again one of the girls would whisper to another, her voice husky with the fear it expressed, "Do you think she can be dead?"—the last word scarcely audible—

and the other would answer dully, "Oh, it can't be, it can't be!"

Then suddenly Marjorie spoke in a tone that sent a warm rush of hope to their hearts:

"Look, look, her eyelids are fluttering. Girls, she's coming back, she's coming back."

With redoubled energy the girls worked now, fostering that tiny spark of life until it should burst into flame. Gradually, the warmth came back into her cold limbs, the color tinged the pallor of her face. Then her eyes slowly opened, and the girls watched their expression change from vague wonder to intelligence.

"Is—Jed—all—right?" she asked, as though doubting her ability to speak.

Miss Howland stepped forward and took the girl's hand gently in her own.

"Yes, he's all right. You mustn't talk very much, Margaret dear. You know you're not very strong yet."

"But I don't remember what happened," she said, with a puzzled frown. And then she continued, slowly, as though searching in her memory for facts: "I leaned over to get Jeddie, and—oh, yes, I remember—somebody called to me—it sounded like Lucile's

voice—but it was too late—the canoe tipped and the water—oh, that awful water,” and she put her hand before her face in a violent shudder.

“Don’t think about it Margaret,” interposed Evelyn, hastily, “it’s all over now and you’re safe and sound,” and she turned away to hide tears of thankfulness.

There was a tremulous silence for a while, as no one trusted herself to speak and then Margaret looked up from her cot timidly and asked:

“Do you suppose—could I see Lucile?”

In a minute Lucile was down on her knees beside the cot, with her arms around the little figure.

“Lucile—I want to make a confession,” Margaret began, hesitatingly. “I did hear you tell me to keep still, but I was proud, and I wanted to save Jeddie all by myself, and so and so—I almost made you lose your life to save mine. I can’t forgive myself,” she wailed, piteously.

But Lucile only tightened her clasp, while Miss Howland and the girls looked on dewy-eyed and oh, so very thankful!

CHAPTER XII

THE FURY OF THE STORM

IF Lucile had been their heroine before, she was a hundred times more so after this adventure that had nearly proved disastrous.

Margaret had almost entirely recovered, and followed Lucile with her eyes when she was in sight, and was restless and discontented when she was away. Although Margaret had really been the cause of the accident, and merited a severe reprimand, Miss Howland wisely decided that she had been punished enough.

Just a few days before the girls had had a great surprise. Jessie had called to Margaret to bring her something, and Margaret, dropping her crutch, had run to her almost naturally.

"Margaret," Lucile had cried, amazed and delighted, "I didn't think you *could* walk without your crutch."

Margaret flushed painfully, and leaned against the

tree for support, while the girls came running up, eager to know what had happened.

"She can walk without her crutch," cried Jessie.

Then the questions had come in a flood.

"Why didn't you tell us about it, Margaret?"

"How long have you been able to do it?" and countless others until the questioners had finally stopped to take breath.

"I didn't mean you to know right away," Margaret had answered. "I was practicing all by myself when no one was around, but to-day I forgot——"

"Oh, Margaret darling, that's the best of all," Lucile had cried, nearly lifting small Margaret off her feet in her ecstasy of joy, "and won't Judge Stillman be happy when he hears of it."

"Oh, but he mustn't know," broke in Margaret, quickly; "promise me you won't tell him. I want so much to surprise him when I can really run about like other girls."

Always that cry "like other girls," that never failed to go straight to the girls' hearts, and made them anxious to help their little friend with her heavy burden.

Now, when it was so suddenly made clear to them that through exercise, fresh air, and wholesome com-

panionship with girls of her own age there was a possibility of little Margaret regaining her health and the use of her poor wasted limb, they were even more ready to help than before, and showered her with little attentions that warmed her heart and helped her more than whole summers full of exercise could have done.

The "hold on to health" law had not been without its influence either, for Margaret was a staunch camp-fire girl, and had striven unceasingly to obey the one law that up to this time had seemed beyond her reach.

To-day had been decided upon for the visit to the other camp, and both girls were looking forward eagerly to the meeting.

It was on one occasion when Lucile was hurrying along with Jed close at her heels that Evelyn cried, "Look at Jed! He's been following you up like your shadow all morning, Lucy. You couldn't get rid of him if you tried."

"Well, I shan't try. He's a mighty good guardian, aren't you, Jed? Come on. I'll give you a race to the tent," and off they went together, Jed barking furiously and bumping into trees when he looked over his shoulder at Lucile, who came panting up behind him.

Down they went to the river bank, where Miss Howland was standing gazing out over the water as though in deep thought.

"We won't be able to use the canoes to-day, will we, Miss Howland?" Lucile asked, wistfully, for the adventure to her lost half of its charm if they had to go by land.

Reluctantly Miss Howland drew her eyes from the horizon and looked at Lucile as though she only partly understood.

"Canoes?" she repeated. "Oh, no, I'm afraid we can't use them to-day. There's a tremendous storm coming up, and I wouldn't take the chance of being caught in it."

"But we won't have to stay home," Lucile cried, a cloud of disappointment crossing her face. "Don't you suppose we could get there before it breaks, if we hurry? Is it very far?"

"Oh, surely, we can walk it," Miss Howland reassured her, shaking off her mood of abstraction and smiling her own bright cheery smile that brought light and warmth to all who came within its radiance, "only we'll have to hurry pretty fast. Let's see if we can't be off within the next five minutes."

It was ten minutes before everything was in readiness, but at the end of that time they swung off down the road with never a care to detract from their pleasure, and their hearts attuned to the song of the birds.

Margaret, between Lucile and Jessie, made her way bravely with the rest, and only occasionally, when she became too tired to walk, would she accept help from her friends. Miss Howland was very careful of her, fearing that the terrible experience of the other day had put her back on the road to recovery more than she had gained. More than once, seeing the tired look in Margaret's eyes, Miss Howland would insist on their forming a seat with their hands and carrying her until she clamored to be set down again.

They were only a few yards from the opposite camp when the storm, so long threatening, burst upon them with unbelievable fury.

"Oh, it's come, it's come!" Evelyn shrieked, her voice shrill above the rising wind.

"Run," Miss Howland commanded sharply. "Here, Lucile, help me with Margaret. You run along, Jessie," and, hair tossed wildly about by the wind, and nearly blinded by the dashing rain, they caught her

up between them and followed the fast disappearing girls.

A second later a dozen dripping camp-fire girls with the little black dog at their heels burst into the mess tent upon an astonished group just then engaged in the delightful occupation of eating lunch. Quickly they jumped from their seats and in open-mouthed amazement gazed at the newcomers. Miss Howland placed Margaret on her feet and stepped forward.

The leader of the other camp, recovering from her astonishment, advanced to meet her.

"I'm sorry we had to make our entrance in so abrupt and informal a manner," Miss Howland began apologetically. "These are the girls of the camp-fire Aloea and I am their guardian. The storm overtook us just on the outskirts of your camp, and we had to run for shelter."

Then pandemonium broke loose. Miss Howland and Miss Stevens introduced their girls, and they instantly formed what their leaders laughingly called a "mutual admiration society." Questions were asked and answered in such droll ways that the tent rang with merry laughter, and there was almost as much noise inside as out.

After a whispered consultation with Miss Howland, Miss Stevens raised her hand for silence.

"Since we were just having lunch when our guests arrived," she began, "and since Miss Howland has informed me that our friends of the camp-fire Aloea have not as yet had theirs, it seems to me that it would be a very good plan to invite our guests to join us. Do we all agree?"

There was a clamorous assent, and even Jed gave an excited bark.

"Isn't this a lark?" whispered Jessie, joyfully, to Lucile, as they crowded around the mess table. "O-a-o, but I'm hungry."

"So am I, rather," answered Lucile, as she bit into a deliciously crisp buttered biscuit, "but I tell you we got in just in the nick of time," she added.

"I guess you did," said Alice Hague, one of the girls whom Lucile had met at the post-office; "just listen to it rain. I'd rather be in here snug and dry than crouching under some tree just at present."

"Yes, and it's a little safer, too," spoke up another girl. "Oh—h!" she exclaimed, and clapped her hands over her ears as a tremendous crash of thunder pealed out directly over their heads.

"I—I am glad I'm not afraid of thunder and lightning," Jessie cried, rather shakily, as she gripped Lucile's arm. "Just listen to it. Oh, Lucy, do you suppose we could be struck?"

"Of course not, you little goose," Lucile answered, in a voice not quite as reassuring as she intended it to be; "not with all these trees. It would strike——oh!" as another tremendous crash shook the earth.

The girls looked from one to another, white-faced and questioning. Jed, at Lucile's feet, whined and shivered and crept closer to her.

"Look how dark it's getting," some one whispered, and the girls suddenly realized that darkness had fallen almost while she spoke.

The rain fell in torrents, driven by the furious wind that howled and moaned and whistled shrilly through the trees, tearing at the tent with eager fingers, and dying away into the distance only to rise again with redoubled fury. One tremendous clap of thunder followed another with relentless persistency, and the ground trembled and shook with the impact.

Never before could the girls remember anything like this. Their splendid bravery was giving way, and something very like panic ran from one to another.

Then they heard Miss Howland's voice, calm and quiet in the fast growing darkness.

"Why, girls, there is nothing to be alarmed about," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone, that brought them all to their senses and made them ashamed of their fears.

"It's only one of those sudden storms that pass as quickly as they come up," said Miss Stevens; "why, it will be over and the sun shining before we know it," she added, cheerily.

But just then, as if to belie her words, a vivid flash of lightning rent the darkness, and the girls instinctively put their hands to their ears to shut out the crash that was sure to follow. Then came something they never forgot. They lived it over in their dreams long after, and were glad to awake and find the stars shining overhead.

It came like fifty cannon bursting in their very ears—a shock that seemed to shake the earth to its very center, followed by a rending, tearing noise, and the sound of a great body falling to the earth.

The girls cried out and clutched each other frantically in their terror. They dared not stir, but sat motionless, half dazed, awaiting they knew not what.

For a long moment it seemed to them that the end of the world had surely come, and they were only waiting for annihilation. Then Miss Howland spoke, and they realized that the earth was still whole, and that as yet they were still alive.

"I fancy that lightning must have struck a tree near by," their guardian was saying in a matter-of-fact tone; "we will have to go out and find it after the storm is over."

"Oh, but that was awful," Margery cried. "I surely thought my end had come. Do you suppose we'll have any more like that?"

"Probably not," Miss Stevens answered soothingly; "we'll hope not, anyway."

So, gradually, under the stimulating words of their leaders, courage returned to the girls, and they began to feel ashamed of their fright. Although the lightning was still frequent and the thunder heavy, it was nothing compared with the former terrific bolt, and they soon found themselves chatting almost as merrily as ever.

"I suppose you do a good deal of canoeing over this side of the river?" Lucile was saying to one of the girls.

"Oh, yes," was the answer, "in fact, we're hardly ever out of them except when we go on our scouting expeditions or take a trip to the village. We're beginning to be quite expert, and Miss Stevens has promised us a canoe trip to one of the islands."

"You will have great fun," prophesied Jessie, who had overheard the last sentence. "We went over just a little while ago and had such a good time we didn't want to go home."

"Yes, especially when we had to fish girls out of the water," said Lucile, with a significant glance in Evelyn's direction.

"What's that?" inquired that personage, rather sharply, "what did you say, Lucy?"

"She said they fished girls out of the water," one of the girls volunteered, with a mystified expression.

"What did you mean, Miss Payton?" cried the other girls, and crowded around, sensing a joke.

"If you tell the girls about that, Lucile Payton, I'll never forgive you," Evelyn threatened, at the same time sending Lucile an imploring glance.

"Why not?" asked Lucile, her eyes dancing with mischief; "it might have happened to any of us, you

know, Evelyn, and we might as well give our neighbors a little innocent amusement."

"Oh, well, go ahead," Evelyn grumbled, "there's no stopping you when you get started until you've had your say out."

"Go ahead, Lucy," urged the girls, and so she launched into the tale with good will, and before she had finished the girls were holding their sides, and even Evelyn allowed herself a sheepish grin.

"It's all very well," she said, "for you girls to laugh, but I can tell you when I fell off the rock I was pretty well scared. You never can tell where you're going to end up when you get started that way."

"Well, you knew we were there to rescue you, anyway," said Margery.

"Oh, yes, that was a great comfort," said Evelyn, in a tone that caused Jessie to remark, "Do I mistake, or does that simple sentence contain a fund of sarcasm with which to crush us?"

"There is no mistake, I fear," Lucile continued, with a mournful shake of the head; "evidently she has no gratitude for us who so valiantly rescued her from a watery grave."

The girls laughed, and Evelyn retorted, "I fear I

haven't, for the watery grave was only about two feet deep. A canoe would have grounded there almost."

"Speaking of canoes," broke in Alice Hague, "I was thinking just the other day what great fun it would be if we could get up some sort of a canoe race."

"Canoe race!" Jessie echoed, staring.

"Sounds good to me," said Lucile with emphasis, leaning forward excitedly; "you mean, have a real canoe race between the two camps?"

"Uh-huh," Alice assented.

"A race! A race!" the girls all cried together, and then and there began a contest as to who could speak the fastest and loudest.

"Let's ask Miss Howland and Miss Stevens," Lucile suggested, when she could make her voice heard above the din.

The two guardians were busily engaged in comparing notes, and the girls hesitated, torn between the desire to have the matter finished at once, and a natural reluctance to interrupt.

However, Miss Stevens sensed that there was something more than usual afoot, and drew Miss Howland's attention to the fact.

"They're dying to put some sort of question to us," she whispered; "let's see what it is. Then, aloud, "Come along, girls. What's the matter now?"

And so they proposed for consideration to their guardian and leader the all-important subject of a canoe race at the end of the season.

"We've had a great deal of practice in the war canoe," Lucile finished, pleadingly, "and I'm sure we could manage it all right."

Certainly the sporting blood of their leaders was aroused, and they almost consented to the proposal. Still, caution refused to be altogether ignored, and they decided to talk it over and give a definite answer later.

"They'll let us, all right," Margery announced, confidently, when the two leaders were again occupied in discussing matters of great import.

"I knew by the look in Miss Howland's eye that she couldn't resist," said Ruth.

"I hope you're right," said Evelyn, who persisted in looking on the gloomy side of everything since the girls, as she expressed it, had infamously held her up to ridicule and scorn. "They'll probably think it's too dangerous, and taboo the whole thing."

"Perhaps," said one of the girls, cheerfully, and

added, philosophically, "even if we can't have the race, we won't be any worse off than we were before."

"Small comfort that is," Jessie sniffed.

"Well, I know what is a comfort, anyway," cried one of the girls as she pulled aside the tent flap and let in a flood of sunshine. "The storm's all over, and we never knew it."

"Oh, isn't it pretty," they all cried as they crowded to the opening.

The sun was dazzling in its brilliancy, and the rain-drops clinging to the leaves and flowers sent back little answering shafts of light. The whole woods seemed somehow changed and more beautiful. The birds sang their songs of homage to the sun, their music mingling with the cool drip of the raindrops.

There was only one discordant note in the whole beautiful picture, and the girls cried out in dismay when they saw it.

Not far from the clearing, indeed, not more than a hundred yards from the mess tent, had stood an enormous tree—the girls had proudly named it "Monarch" for its size and bulk. It was there the lightning had struck in that awful black moment, and now the giant lay upon the ground uprooted bodily, and surrounded by twigs and whole branches that had been

torn from neighboring trees in its descent, prostrate, shorn of all its glory, notwithstanding its gigantic strength, so pitifully inadequate against the giant forces of nature.

"Oh, our poor old monarch," Alice cried in real grief. "Miss Stevens, come and see the poor old tree. It must have been struck that time."

They all made their way to the fallen monarch and the girls marveled at its unusual length.

"It looks ever so much shorter than it did standing," cried one of the girls, "but it's a monster, just the same."

"It's no wonder we were almost scared to death," said Evelyn. "I would have felt very sorry for any one who happened to be standing in its way when it fell."

"And well you might be," remarked Miss Howland, gravely, then added, "It's just about time for us to be getting back. We have had such a very enjoyable visit here," she smiled, winningly, "that we haven't noticed how very fast the time was flying."

"But wasn't there one thing we wanted to speak to the girls about before you went?" Miss Stevens inquired with an innocent air, as if the affair were of

such small importance that it had almost escaped her memory.

"It almost seems to me there was," Miss Howland answered. "Oh, yes, it was something about a canoe race."

All this time the girls had been waiting expectantly, knowing what was coming, and now they pressed forward with an eager "Yes?"

"Well," said Miss Howland, with exasperating deliberation, "Miss Stevens and I have considered the matter from all sides, and we have decided that——" again she paused, watching the young faces before her delightedly, and passing a droll look in Miss Stevens' direction, who for her part was enjoying the little comedy immensely. But this was more than human nature could stand, and the girls openly revolted.

"What?" they cried, impatiently, and Evelyn added, "Please go on, we can't wait."

"Well," Miss Howland finished, "we have decided that a canoe race wouldn't be altogether out of the question."

"Hurrah!" they cried, wildly, and then such a shout broke the quiet as set the birds to singing in opposition, and drove Jed mad with excitement.

CHAPTER XIII

TOO CURIOUS

RACE, race, race! Nothing else had been heard from morning till night in the camp-fire group since the two leaders had given their consent. Never were they completely happy until they had fulfilled all minor duties and had pushed the great war canoe from the bank and were off for practice. And practise they did, with such ardor that at the end of a week every one of the camp-fire girls was confident that the other girls stood no chance at all of winning. Needless to say that their opponents had a similar conviction, all of which boded well for the success of the race.

Lucile had met Alice on one of her scouting expeditions, and in their conversation Alice spoke of the island and their intended visit. Upon Lucile describing her adventures and the discovery of the "fairy grotto," Alice proposed that she with some other girls and Lucile with her squad journey over there together some time toward the end of the week. Lucile had

agreed enthusiastically, provided, of course, that their guardian approved.

In their talk together Alice had learned much about the camp-fire girls and warmed up cordially to the idea.

"Oh, I wish we could form a camp-fire," she had cried. "I'm sure Miss Stevens would act as guardian, and we'd have ever so much more fun than we do now."

"Well, there's nothing to stop you," said Lucile. "I tell you I never thought there could be so much fun, even in the every-day things like cooking and mending and taking care of gardens, until I became a camp-fire girl."

"And you will show me your count, didn't you call it, and your honor beads and all the rest, if I come over soon?" she begged, as she turned to go.

"I'd love to," Lucile had answered, emphatically.

So on the day agreed upon Lucile arose early with a light heart to find the world bathed in sunshine, giving promise of a perfect day.

"I'm so glad we're going, Lucy," Jessie whispered to her friend. "I've been wishing for ever so long that we might see the island again. It looks as if we were

going to have a good day for it," eyeing the horizon speculatively.

"Surely we are," said Lucile, cheerfully. "There isn't a single cloud in the sky."

Half an hour later they started, while the girls who were not included in the expedition looked after them enviously. However, Miss Howland had promised another trip in the near future, and with this promise they must needs be content.

Lucile led her small fleet to a spot half way between the camps that had been agreed upon as their rendezvous. Although early themselves, they found the others there before them and impatiently awaiting their arrival. "Hello," cried Alice as they came in sight. "We thought you had changed your minds and weren't coming after all. What made you so late?"

"We're not late," Lucile denied, indignantly. "We're a little ahead of time and you're way early."

"Why, we can't be," said Anne, incredulously.

Anne was a very important member of the other camp and much given to correcting those with whom she was associated. Be it said to her credit, however, that she had conscientiously tried to rid herself of the

habit of late, but, in spite of her earnest efforts, the improvement up to this time had not been noticeable. She had dark brown eyes and golden hair, and an expression that would have softened a heart of stone. So far from resenting her criticism, which at times and from a different person would have been distinctly irritating, the girls had learned to take it all in good part. They even helped her by saying nothing until such time as her heart reproached her and she would come to the girls and say with a little apologetic smile: "I'm sorry I spoke that way. You probably were right after all." Such was the girl who had treated Lucile's statement so cavalierly.

Lucile flushed, and it required all her self-control to keep her from saying something she surely would have regretted later.

"It's very likely our clocks don't agree," said Evelyn, seeking to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"Anyway, it's a good deal better to be too early than too late," said Lucile, merrily, as she brought her canoe up beside Alice. "It will give us all the more time to spend on the island. What do you say if we start now?"

"Surely," said Alice. "There's nothing to keep us and I can't wait to get there. Are you all ready, girls?"

There was a general "Aye, aye, captain," and they started off two and two, Lucile and Alice leading, while the others kept close in their wake.

"This air makes you feel as if you could move mountains," Lucile confided to Alice. "I hope we have a day like this for our race."

"Oh, so do I. What will we do if it rains?" and her voice was tragic with the possibility. "What would we do?" she asked again.

"Doubtless we'd put it off till some other day when it didn't rain," Jessie suggested drily. "It seems to me that is the only solution."

"That's all very well if the rain only lasts a day," retorted Lucile, quickly, "but suppose it lasts three or four days? We've set the day so near the end of vacation that we should either have to give it up altogether or race in the rain."

"Away with such dismal thoughts," cried Anne, blithely. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Don't let's worry till the time comes."

"Very good advice, Anne," quoth Alice, wisely,

"but a little worry is good for everybody once in a while."

"All right, I'll let the rest of you do the worrying for me then," said Jessie, airily. "I haven't the time."

"I remember a time when you let everybody else do everything for you, Jessie," put in Evelyn, slyly. "That was quite a long time ago, though, before you became a camp-fire girl."

"That's not fair, raking up one's awful past," laughed Lucile. "I don't think Jessie's touched a candy for the last three months."

"Four months," Jessie corrected. "If you rake up any more of my past history, Evelyn, I'm likely to give you a ducking when we get over to the island."

"Come on and try," she challenged. "I'm just as strong as you are."

"You'll have a chance to prove which is the stronger very soon," said Lucile. "It hasn't taken us any time at all to get there."

"It surely hasn't," agreed Alice. "Where do we land, Lucile?"

"Skirt the shore to the right for a little way, and you'll come to an inlet. That's where we landed before. There it is now."

"Isn't this great?" the girls cried, and Jessie exclaimed, joyfully, "It's just made for a canoe landing!"

Then there was a great scurrying and scrambling, until, one by one, they had landed and drawn up the canoes. So still was the water and so great their hurry that they did not give as much time and care to this important matter as they usually did.

"Now we're all ready," said Alice, drawing a long breath, as the last girl joined the little group. "Lead and we follow to fairyland."

"Oh, that's far too easy," said Lucile. "We're going to take you to the place where we ate our lunch the other day, and then you can separate as we did, and see who will find fairyland first;" and she laughed mischievously as she saw the look of surprise on their faces.

"Oh, that's mean," said Anne. "You didn't say you were going to make us hunt for it."

"It's only fair," Lucile defended.

"Sure it is," admitted Alice. "We can't expect to have all the fun and none of the work. Come on, girls, it will give us a good appetite."

"And hunting it will be as jolly a lark as finding it," another chimed in merrily, and soon they were all of the same mind, even Anne, and were urging Lucile to hurry to the spot.

"You never told me you were going to do this, Lucile," whispered Jessie, reproachfully, as they took the lead.

"What was the use?" asked Lucile, her eyes sparkling. "You and the rest would only have had some objection to offer, and besides I wanted to surprise you too."

"Oh, you're incorrigible," sighed Jessie, giving her friend up as a "bad job."

"What did you call her?" queried Alice, who had caught the last word.

"Oh, she couldn't say it again, if she tried," teased Evelyn; "she only risked it then because she thought no one was listening."

"Humph, she's only jealous," Jessie retorted. "I bet she doesn't even know what it means."

"That reminds me," said Evelyn with significant emphasis, "that we didn't have that little trial of strength down by the river. Shall we go back now or wait till we start for home?" this with a fierce

frown that would have made one shudder had it not been for the smile lurking underneath.

"Oh, any old time will do," said Jessie, carelessly, turning the matter aside with an indifferent wave of the hand. "The affair is of no consequence."

"Oh, very well, we shall see what we shall see," said Evelyn, darkly.

"We shall," assented Jessie, with a tone of finality.

"Do my eyes deceive me," interrupted Lucile, "or do I perceive a short distance ahead the stone which marks our journey's end?"

"Your eyes are all right, I guess, Lucy," said Dorothy. "That's the rock, sure enough."

"The very rock," Jessie agreed; and a few minutes later they were standing on the spot they had occupied not so very long ago.

"Oh, it *is* beautiful," murmured Alice, softly. "I thought you had exaggerated a little when you told me about it, Lucile, but I guess you haven't—not a bit."

"I don't think any one could half do it justice," said Lucile, and then, brightly, "but this is nothing to the beauty of fairyland. You'd better hustle a bit, too, if you're going to find it before noon."

However, the girls were so enraptured where they were, that it took some time and not a little persuasion to pry them loose. Finally, they set off in different directions, our girls staying behind at the huge rock to watch the lunch and to listen for the yodel that would be the signal of discovery.

"I hope they find it pretty soon," said Lucile. "I'm getting awfully hungry."

"Your blood be on your own head if you have to wait," said Ruth, who had after persistent urging been admitted to the group. "You're the one who did it all."

"Well, I'm willing to suffer for my own folly," said Lucile, cheerfully.

"Yes, but how about your poor friends who are in no way to blame," asked Jessie, wiping an imaginary tear from her eyes. "Can you bear to sit there and see them suffer?"

"No, I can't," said Lucile, jumping to her feet as a clear call broke the silence. "They've found the grotto in a hurry."

"But that didn't come from the direction of the grotto!" exclaimed Evelyn, excitedly.

"That's so, it didn't," answered Lucile. "Listen," as the signal came again.

"Perhaps they've found another one," she suggested. "Come on, we might as well find out what it is."

Quickly they made their way in the direction of the sound and in a few minutes came upon Alice.

"I haven't found the grotto," she exclaimed, "but I've come across the most wonderful cave. Come," and she fairly dragged the bewildered girls along.

Suddenly she reached out her arm and drew aside what seemed to be a tangled mass of vines and foliage, disclosing a yawning black hole, evidently the mouth of an enormous cave.

Instinctively the girls drew back a step or two from the great hole, and looked from one to the other, wonderingly.

"How did you find it, Alice?" Lucile asked, at last.

"Why, I was hurrying along looking for the grotto and my dress caught on the vines. When I stooped over to unfasten it, I gave it a sudden pull and drew the vines aside. Then I saw this hole."

"Weren't you scared?" Dorothy questioned, her eyes big.

"I wasn't at first," answered Alice. "I was too curious to be afraid. Then when I saw it was a big

cave, I felt kind of creepy and called for you girls. And here we are," she concluded.

"Suppose it were some old smuggler's cave," Lucile suggested, "and he'd hidden chests and chests of treasure in the back of the cave. I wonder who'll be the first to go in after it."

"I will," said Jessie, leaning way over to peer farther into the black depths of the cave. "But it's awfully dark in there," she added, with a little involuntary shudder.

By this time the other girls had come up and the discovery had to be explained to them all over again.

"Isn't it great?" said one, when they had finished. "Aren't you going to see what's in there?"

"Suppose you go yourself," Alice retorted.

"I don't think anybody would better be too curious as long as Miss Howland and Miss Stevens aren't here," said Lucile. "Miss Howland told us before we left not to inquire too deeply into the mysteries of the island when she wasn't with us. I wondered what she meant at the time, but it's easy enough to understand now."

"Well, as long as that's so, we might as well leave

the cave and set out for fairyland again," said one of the girls.

"By the way, I think I've found fairyland," said Anne. "I was just going to call when I heard the signal and thought I must be mistaken."

"I tell you what you do," said Lucile. "You go on ahead and we will follow more slowly, stopping on our way to get the basket. When you call, we'll come, bringing the lunch."

"Oh, it makes me hungry just to think of it!" exclaimed Jessie. "What did you girls put in the basket, anyway? I hope it was something nice."

She was soon reassured on this point, and they hurried on to the big rock. No sooner had they reached it than they heard Anne's call.

"There she goes," cried Evelyn, as she pounced on a basket.

"You talk as if she were an alarm clock," Lucile commented.

"I didn't say 'off she goes,' but 'there she goes,' " replied Evelyn, as they swung off through the woods.

"Same thing, same thing," said Jessie.

"Oh, you're always pickin' on me!" wailed Evelyn. "I don't care, Jessie; I've got the lunch-basket, and

you'd better be careful what you say or you won't get any."

Jessie's manner changed as if by magic, and she squeezed her erstwhile enemy's arm, confidentially. "Now, you know I was always your best friend, don't you, Evelyn, dear?" she wheedled. "I never would say anything against you."

"Just put that down in black and white, properly signed and witnessed, and I may believe you," said Evelyn, with mock severity.

Jessie had no time to reply, for just then they stepped out of the woods and into the garden spot they called their grotto.

For a time the girls even forgot their ravenous appetites, either in the delight of taking in the beauty of the place for the first time, or, as in the case of our girls, in renewing their acquaintance with every stone and flower of the place.

It was Evelyn who brought their thoughts back to the commonplace by exclaiming:

"Oh, girls, I'll die if we don't eat soon!"

"For goodness' sake, give her something to eat right away," advised Ruth. "She'd be quite a load to carry down to the river."

The girls needed no second invitation, and in a remarkably short time they had all the good things spread out on the rock and were gathered eagerly around.

"It was wonderful to see those biscuits disappear," said Anne, as she settled back, contentedly, after doing full justice to her share of the dainties.

"Yes, I don't seem to feel nearly so hungry as when I started," remarked Jessie, between bites.

"That's a joke, girls," mocked Evelyn. "Why don't you laugh?"

"That was not intended as a joke," said Jessie, with dignity. "It was merely a statement of fact, and I don't want you to laugh, either."

After the last scrap had been cleared away, the girls stretched themselves out contentedly on the soft moss and talked of various matters, especially of the coming canoe race.

"Oh, I do hope we'll have a good day for it!" Anne exclaimed, for perhaps the tenth time, when Jessie interrupted:

"I wonder where Ruth is," she said. "She doesn't seem to be anywhere around."

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Lucile, a little

perplexedly. "She was here just a little while ago. Maybe she's gone down to the river to see if the canoes are safe. It wouldn't be a very bad idea if we should follow her example."

"It isn't like Ruth to do anything like that without letting us know," Jessie objected.

"I know it isn't, but I don't know where else she could have gone. Come on, let's hunt her up," and Lucile got up from her soft couch and started for the river. Reluctantly the girls followed.

When they reached the water there was no sign of the truant, and the canoes were undisturbed.

"It seems to me that the water is rougher than it was when we crossed," said Lucile, gazing anxiously out over the river. "The wind seems to be rising, too. If Ruth were here, I'd give the word to start right away; but, of course, we'll have to find her first. Come on, let's hurry."

Quickly they made their way back to the grotto, their hearts touched with fear, for, as Lucile had said, the wind was rising and the sun had gone under a cloud.

They called Ruth's name again and again, but received no answer, except the faintest of faint echoes

that came back to them from the other side of the island.

"Oh, what shall we do, what shall we do?" Evelyn wailed, panic-stricken.

By this time they had retraced their steps to the grotto, calling every few steps, and yet there was no sign or sound that would serve as a clue to Ruth's whereabouts.

"We'll just have to keep on till we find her," said Lucile, grimly. Then turning to Alice, she said:

"You would better take your girls and start for home before the storm breaks. You can just about make it, if you travel fast. Of course, we'll stay and face it out."

"We'll stay as long as you have to," Alice declared, stoutly. "I'm sure the girls feel just the same way. Don't you, girls?"

There was a hearty, "Well, I guess," from the girls, and Lucile cried:

"You're all awfully good. Perhaps we'll be able to do something for you some day."

This time the girls separated and started out, two by two, in different directions, with orders to

search thoroughly, and in case they should not find her before then, to return to the grotto in half an hour.

The time was almost up when Lucile, who had started with Jessie to scour the woods in the general direction of the cave, saw, or fancied she saw, something roving among the trees.

"Look there!" she cried, clutching Jessie by the arm. "I thought I saw something move. It's so dark that I can't be sure, but it looked—come on over and find out what it is. Maybe Ruth's there."

"But if it's Ruth, why doesn't she answer?" Jessie whispered, trembling. "Oh, Lucy, I don't think we'd better go any farther! Let's go back."

"You're not afraid, are you?" breathed Lucile, with such fierce scorn that Jessie instinctively stiffened.

"No, I'm not afraid," she said through chattering teeth. "Come on and I'll show you whether I am or not," and pushing past her friend, she rushed forward recklessly and broke through the bushes, with Lucile close at her heels.

What she saw made her jump back, almost upsetting Lucile in her astonishment. Another instant, and she ran forward again, dragging her friend with her.

"Ruth!" she cried. "Why didn't you answer when we called?"

"I couldn't," sobbed Ruth. "I didn't want you to know I had come here, and I was trying all the time to get loose and I—I—couldn't."

It was, indeed, a sorry spectacle that met the girls' astonished eyes.

After they had finished eating, Ruth had stolen back to the cave, lured by curiosity to see what she could find, and when she started to return, had been caught and held in a thicket of thorn bushes into which she had blundered.

"And then," she went on in reply to their questioning, "I was ashamed to have you find me here, so I went on trying to get free. And I'd have done it, too," she wailed, "if it hadn't been for my hair. I untangled some of it and tore a lot out. But it all took so much time," and here another sob choked her.

The girls had an hysterical desire to laugh and cry all at once. At any other time the whole thing would have appeared ridiculous, and they would have fairly shrieked at her predicament.

But now the sighing of the wind had risen to a howl and it was so dark that they could barely distinguish

each other, while from where they stood they could hear the rush of the water as it pounded on the shore.

"We haven't a minute to lose," said Lucile, as she loosened the still imprisoned strands of Ruth's hair and set her free. "Let's hurry back to the grotto. They're all there before this, probably."

As Lucile had surmised, the girls were awaiting their coming, anxiously fearful lest the search of these two, like their own, should have been in vain.

When they saw Ruth there was a general shout of relief. They had short time for rejoicing, however, and after the first little outburst they turned their attention to the more serious matter of getting back to camp.

"Let's go down to the river and see that the canoes are safe, Lucile suggested. "It's out of the question to start right now, but we can at least haul the canoes farther up on the shore. The wind is so strong that I'm afraid——"

Spurred on by some obscure premonition of disaster, the girls ran down the path, and at last came to the inlet where they had fastened the canoes.

Speechless, they stared, not daring to believe the evidence of their eyes. Far out from the island, and

drifting farther and farther from shore with every second, were the canoes, washed away by the rising waters, carrying with them their only means of reaching the opposite shore that day.

“They’ve broken loose,” Lucile groaned, despairingly, and then in an agony of self-reproach: “Oh, I ought to have known better! Why didn’t I haul them way up on the bank before we went in search of Ruth?”

CHAPTER XIV

A TIMELY RESCUE

"IT ISN'T your fault more than anybody else," said Jessie, loyally.

"It isn't anybody's fault but mine," mourned Ruth, and it was the first time she had been heard to utter a word of self-reproach. "If you hadn't had to hunt for me, all this wouldn't have happened."

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps it's all for the best that we didn't start when I thought we should," said Lucile, generously. "It's mighty rough out there."

"But the canoes," Evelyn wailed. "We'll never be able to get them again."

"If they only keep in sight, we'll be able to get them after the storm is over."

"How do you suppose you are going to reach them?" Anne objected. "Are you going to swim?"

"Hardly that," Lucile retorted. "Miss Howland and Miss Stevens know where we are, and they're not likely to leave us here to starve."

"But they'll be so worried," said Alice, anxiously. "They may think we've had an accident. Oh, if there were only some way by which we could let them know we're safe!"

Helplessly the girls looked at the angry waste of waters.

"There's only one thing we can do," said Lucile, with decision.

"What's that?" the girls questioned hopefully, for they had great confidence in Lucile's ability.

"Why, we'll have to station ourselves at different points on the island and be on the lookout for any boat that may be passing."

"It isn't very likely that there'll be any on the river now, when it's so rough," said Anne.

"Of course, it isn't likely; but you must admit it's possible," replied Lucile, a little impatiently. "If you have anything better to offer, let's have it."

"I'm sorry I spoke that way," said Anne, so humbly that Lucile looked at her in surprise. She was not yet accustomed to that young lady's quick changes of mind. "I suppose your suggestion is the only possible one."

"Go on, Lucile. Just tell us what to do and we'll

do it," said Alice. "I've seen several fishing smacks floating around here when we were at camp, and it's barely possible that one may pass."

Lucile unfastened the broad red ribbon that kept the troublesome but very pretty curls in place and tied it securely to a stick.

"If you girls don't mind spoiling your ribbons, you'd better make a signal of them, as I'm doing," she remarked.

When they had followed her advice, she sent them hurrying to various points with directions to wave their sticks frantically if they should see any sign of a boat.

"For," she said, "we couldn't make ourselves heard above this wind, and our only hope is in catching the eye of some belated fisherman. Good luck to us all," she toasted. "Now, let's scatter."

It must be admitted that the girls would have regarded the whole affair in the light of a romantic adventure if it hadn't been for the loss of the canoes and the anxiety they were causing their leaders. The shrieking of the wind through the trees, the roar of the waves as they broke upon the shore and the semi-darkness—all combined to clothe the island with a

mantle of mystery. The trees bent and swayed in the gale and the vines whipped their faces as they raced to their appointed places.

"It's so different," gasped Jessie, as they halted to rest for a second.

"What do you mean?" Lucile asked.

"Oh, all this," answered Jessie, taking in the whole island with a comprehensive wave of the hand. "Just a little while ago it was all sunshine; the birds were singing, and it was all so peaceful and quiet—and now it's all different——"

"Yes, it doesn't seem like the same place at all," Lucile finished, sympathetically. "Oh, I do wish it would get lighter. If anybody did happen to be cruising around here, they wouldn't see the signal in this light."

"I was just thinking of that," said Jessie. "It would be awful if we missed it just because they couldn't see us waving."

"Well, we certainly can't make ourselves seen if we stay here," said Lucile.

"Sure thing," assented Jessie, and so they started off once more with the determination to do or die.

When they reached the spot Lucile had allotted to

herself and Jessie, they searched the river in vain for anything to break that monotonous stretch of water.

"Well, we can't do anything else just now," sighed Lucile, "so we might as well make ourselves comfortable."

"I suppose so," said Jessie, and then, as a fresh gale struck the island with renewed fury that tore branches from the protesting trees and dashed them in a thick rain upon the ground, she cried: "Oh, Lucy, I believe it's getting worse every minute."

"If we could only get word to Miss Howland, I wouldn't care what happened. We're perfectly safe here," and once more Lucile jumped to her feet and searched the river, but with little hope of finding anything.

Then suddenly her gaze became fixed, and Jessie cried: "What is it, Lucy? What do you see?"

"Come here, quick," said Lucile in a tense voice. "Am I dreaming, or is that really a boat?" and she pointed to a small, dim object that was creeping up under the lee of the island.

"Oh, it is, it is!" Jessie exclaimed, jumping up and down in her excitement. "It's too good to be true. And it's coming right this way, too."

"Get out your signal, quick," Lucile commanded. "He can't help seeing it, he's so near the shore. Wave it hard—hard," she cried, and suiting her action to the word, she waved her own red ribbon frantically.

For a few breathless moments they thought that their signal would pass unnoticed, and what they had dreaded in the waning light would really happen. But fate was kind to them, and just as they were ready to despair the little craft was turned and headed toward the shore in their direction.

As it came nearer, the girls saw that it had only one occupant, but who he was or what he looked like they were unable to distinguish. However, this made little difference to them, for they were so elated at the prospect of getting back to camp, and perhaps at the same time regaining their canoes, that the personality of their rescuer was a matter of slight importance.

Silently they stood on the bank, scarcely able to realize that the boat, looking so ghostly and fantastic in the weird half-light, was actually coming to take them from the island back to their friends.

"Ahoy there!" came a shout. "You on shore there, do you need any help?"

"That sounds real, anyway," whispered Jessie.
"Answer, Lucy."

"All right," said Lucile, and her voice rang out over the water, it's bell-like clarity rising above the roar of the tempest:

"Ship ahoy!" she cried, making a trumpet of her cupped hands. "We are stranded here and need help. Will you take us off?"

"Sure," came back the answer in a hearty voice that made the girls trust its owner, even before they saw him.

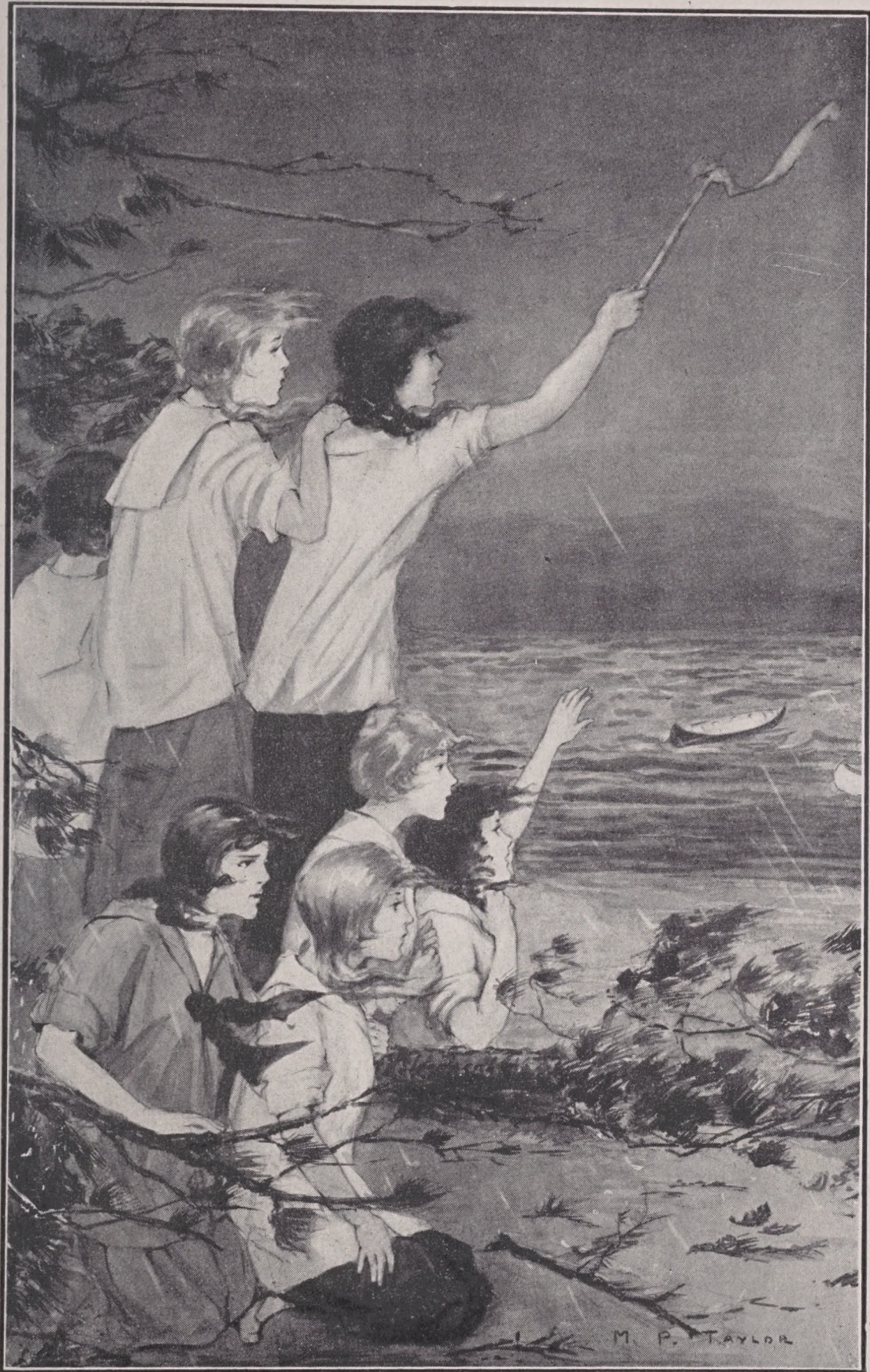
The girls waited impatiently, for now that rescue was so near at hand they hated to delay making known their success to the other girls. Now their rescuer had unfastened the dinghy that trailed in the wake of the flat-bottomed, clumsy fishing boat and was making his way slowly toward them through the rough water. A few minutes more and he had driven his queer little craft close to the shore and had scrambled on the bank with the tow-line in his hand. Then, for the first time, the girls had a look at the owner of the pleasant voice.

Although he was a man well advanced in years and his hair was snowy white, his great height and the

breadth of his shoulders belied any suggestion of weakness. He emanated strength and gave the impression of having an immense store of reserve vitality. The girls could not have explained their feeling, but the moment he stepped on the bank all fear and anxiety left them like a troubled dream, and they felt suddenly and inexplicably safe from all danger. He was clothed in ordinary fisherman's garb, but his personality imparted an air of distinction to his clothes, as though they had been made for him alone.

"Well," said the hearty voice, with just a note of surprise mingled with its geniality, "seems as if I happened along just in the nick of time. Thought I'd gone clear out o' my head when I saw that red thing wavin' at me from out the trees. Tell me where you're from and how you came to be on this island that I thought nobody ever came to but me," and he stood regarding the girls kindly.

"Why, we belong to the camp-fire over there," said Lucile, waving her hand in the direction of the camp, "and we came over this morning. We had our lunch with us, and expected to start back early this afternoon." Here she hesitated, undecided whether or not to tell this stranger, however kind he might be, of



"FOR A FEW BREATHLESS MOMENTS, THEY THOUGHT THAT THEIR
SIGNAL WOULD PASS UNNOTICED."

their folly in allowing the canoes to drift away. But the newcomer settled the question himself by asking:

“How did you come over?”

After that, there was, of course, nothing to do but make a clean breast of it, which she did, albeit with strong fears of the estimate in which he would hold her commonsense. But when he spoke there was no trace of anything but sympathy in his voice.

“And so you rigged up that bit of a signal to attract any fool who might be out on the river such a day as this?” he said, and then added: “But surely you were safe enough here until the storm was over, and then your guardian, as you call her, could have come over after you.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that!” broke in Jessie, quickly. “We were afraid Miss Howland would think that we had started and met with some accident, especially if one of the empty canoes should happen to drift in toward shore.”

“Well, well, we can soon set any fears of that sort at rest,” he said, reassuringly. “Where are the rest of the young ladies? If you will get them together, we can start right away. I guess I can pack you all in the boat.”

Nothing loath, Lucile and Jessie made their way back to the grotto, calling as they went, and soon the girls came running, eager to know what had happened. When Lucile broke the news they gave a cheer that reached their friend where he stood alone near the water's edge and caused him to smile an indulgent, fatherly smile, that was, nevertheless, somewhat tinged with sadness.

A few minutes more and they were gathered about him, joyful at the thought of release, but still anxious for the recovery of the canoes.

The stranger introduced himself to the girls as Carston Wescott, commonly known, he said, by all who knew him at all as "the wanderer."

"I think," he told them, in answer to their queries about the canoes—"I think there's a good chance that we'll find the canoes floating peacefully, after the storm is over, somewhere between your two camps. The wind was in that direction. Of course, too, it's possible they've been blown ashore."

So, with renewed hope, the girls one by one were lowered into the dingy and rowed to the squat little fishing smack.

When they were all safe on board, "the wanderer"

set sail in the direction of camp-fire Aloea. The wind had died down considerably, but the water was still rough enough to make the sail exciting.

"This would be mighty rough work in one of those little canoes of yours. How about it?" their rescuer asked, as a great comber bore down on them with a rapidity that made them draw a quick breath.

"I guess so," gasped Alice, as the sturdy little boat plowed through, sending the spray up high on either side.

"Yes, I'd much rather be just where I am at present," Evelyn agreed.

The passage was swift, and soon the boat drew up and slackened sail in front of Miss Stevens' camp, and the girls felt a little twinge of conscience as they saw the white, strained faces of their friends who had gathered on the bank to greet them.

Our girls stayed on the smack while the others were being conveyed to shore, and when they saw the look of immense relief on the welcoming faces they could hardly wait to be on their way to their own camp and Miss Howland.

"Two or three canoes did come ashore, a little farther up," "the wanderer" announced, as he turned in

the direction of camp-fire Aloea. "They were sure that you were all drowned then, although they couldn't understand how the canoes came to be right side up with the paddles still in," he chuckled.

The girls overwhelmed him with questions. How many canoes had come ashore? At what point? What names were on them? A host of similar queries rained upon him, but to none could he give a definite reply.

"Miss Stevens seemed to think I ought to get you over to your own camp as soon as possible," he said, by way of explanation. "She said your guardian had walked all the way to her camp to find out whether you might have landed there. She started back half an hour ago."

Silence fell on the girls, and for the time they desired only one thing—to get to the camp quickly and dispel their guardian's fears.

The journey seemed interminable, but at last they rounded the point, and saw, as they had expected, all the girls gathered on the shore. But Miss Howland was nowhere to be seen.

At sight of them, the group on the bank cried out joyfully and ran to the very edge of the water to wel-

come them. A moment later and the girls spied their guardian, her face still white, but with the strained look gone, and in its place an expression of such profound relief and joy as the girls had never seen before.

The wanderer rowed his charges ashore, and they rushed straight into their guardian's waiting arms—their dear guardian, who laughed over them and cried over them and held them tight, as if she never meant to let them go again.

In the joy of reunion they came very near forgetting the one who was responsible for it all. He was just setting out quietly in his dinghy when Lucile broke loose and cried :

“Oh, but Miss Howland, you haven't met our rescuer, Mr. Wescott! If it hadn't been for him we wouldn't be here now.”

Miss Howland went forward with outstretched hands and an April smile.

“You must forgive me,” she said, softly. “I was so overjoyed at having my girls back again——” here she choked and the man came to her rescue.

“I'm glad,” he said, hastily, “that I've been able to save you some hours of anxiety. I live in the little

stone house over the hill, and if I can ever be of any help, I'll be glad to have you call on me."

"You are very good," said Miss Howland, gratefully, as she gazed up into the strong face of the man towering above her. "I want to thank you——"

"Please don't," he interrupted, hurriedly. "I don't deserve any," and with an abrupt nod he turned, stepped into his little boat and rowed over to the smack.

"It's strange," Miss Howland murmured, as she stood in the center of the little group. "He looks so much like—what did you say his name was, Lucy?" she asked suddenly.

"Wescott," answered Lucile.

Miss Howland started. "Wescott," she repeated, and then sharply: "Are you sure?"

"That's what he said," Lucile replied, wonderingly. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing," Miss Howland answered, vaguely, and then added, gaily: "Come, let's have some supper. I shouldn't wonder if you girls were rather hungry by this time."

"Oh, are we?" cried Jessie. "This wonderful air sure does make you ravenous."

And out on the water, sailing away toward the little house he called home, was Carston Wescott, his head resting on his hand and a wistful look in his eyes.

"Youth, youth," he murmured. "What a good thing it is to be young!"

CHAPTER XV

THE PANTHER SPRINGS

ON A bright, sunshiny morning, soon after their adventure, Miss Howland and the girls set out to pay a visit to their rescuer. Miss Howland had reproached herself many times for neglecting to thank him more heartily at the time for the great service he had done them, and so had resolved upon this plan to relieve her conscience.

But when they set out, the girls, who were in the best of humor and ready for any adventure that might come their way, could not help remarking their guardian's unusual thoughtfulness and taciturnity, and their spirits were somewhat dampened thereby.

"I wish I knew what was the matter," Lucile confided to Jessie. "She hasn't been herself all morning."

Overhearing the last remark, Marjorie broke in with, "All morning! Why, she hasn't been the same since the day of the storm!"

"I know it," Lucile agreed. "After the council fire the other night I couldn't resist the temptation to take

one more look at the river by moonlight, and when I stepped out of the tent I saw——” but here she paused, instinct preventing her, just in time, from a revelation of what was most sacred to her guardian and concerned her only.

“Saw what?” Evelyn persisted, but Lucile remained firm, and the girls soon gave up the attempt to force an explanation.

“I think you’re mean,” Jessie pouted finally. “You get our curiosity all roused and then stop short just at the interesting part.”

“Isn’t it sad?” Lucile laughed, and then, to change the subject, “I wonder whether Mr. Wescott will be home when we get there.”

“I hope so,” said Jessie. “I can’t wait to see him again. He was so good to us that day.”

And so the subject was changed, but the picture remained as firmly imprinted on Lucile’s heart and mind as it had been that night—the picture of her guardian, as she sat with her chin in her hand and her beautiful profile silhouetted against the dull red of the few gleaming embers, and such a look of wistfulness and longing in her face as had made Lucile’s heart go out to her in a rush of sympathy.

For a moment Lucile had hesitated whether to go forward or retreat, until, with the sudden realization that she was spying, however unintentionally, she had turned hurriedly and made her way back to the tent.

"Lucile," Jessie cried, impatiently, "I don't believe you've heard a word I've been saying. You keep saying 'yes' and 'no,' and all the time I can tell your mind is miles away. You might listen once in a while."

With an effort Lucile shook off the memory, and turned her attention to the business at hand.

"What were you saying?" she asked, contritely, of her friend. "If you will say it all over again, I'll promise not to let my mind wander any more."

She was as good as her word, and in a few minutes they were deep in a discussion of the race.

"Oh, I'm so glad we got back the canoes," Evelyn cried. "I don't think I would be able to take any interest in the race if we hadn't. I wonder what Judge Stillman would say if he knew."

"Speaking of Judge Stillman," Lucile broke in, "I wonder when Margaret means to tell him how much stronger she is. Why, girls, every day there's a wonderful improvement."

Here Miss Howland, who had been walking ahead, abstractedly, joined in the conversation.

"I've been hoping all along," she said, "that a summer out in the woods would help Margaret, but I hardly dared hope, until recently, that the improvement would be so great. Suppose, just by joining the camp-fire, Margaret should entirely recover the use of that poor, little crippled limb and be like other girls. Wouldn't you be glad and feel amply repaid for any little sacrifice you have made?" and Miss Howland regarded the girls with a smile more like her own than they had seen for many a day.

"Glad!" the girls echoed, and their faces became illumined, while Lucile cried, joyfully, "Oh, Miss Howland, it would be a miracle! Do you suppose poor little Margaret could ever really be like other girls?"

"She has every chance in the world," Miss Howland answered. "I wrote to Judge Stillman the other day, but I didn't dare mention any marked improvement. It is the child's dearest wish to surprise him."

Before the girls' imagination arose a picture of Judge Stillman and little Margaret, as she showed her father that she was, at last, like "other girls." A

very pleasant picture, and they were still thinking of it when a turn in the road brought them upon the little cabin.

Miss Howland hesitated for a moment, then raised the knocker and let it fall with a great noise on the heavy wooden door. No sooner had the noise died away than there was the sound of a barking and scurrying, and around the side of the house came a great dog, skidding and sliding as he tried to keep his balance.

In alarm the girls jumped back, and when they discovered the cause of the disturbance they stared in amazement. A tiny jack rabbit flew past them like the wind and disappeared in his burrow just in time to elude the hungry jaws of its pursuer.

"Come here, Bunk," and they turned to see Mr. Wescott round the corner of the house. "Didn't I tell you not to do that again?"

When he saw the group he was scarcely less surprised than they. His face lighted up with genuine pleasure and he advanced toward them with outstretched hand.

"Well, now, I'm glad to see you all," said he, heartily. "I hope Bunk didn't frighten you much,"

as he saw that they were still breathless at the dog's unexpected appearance.

Miss Howland answered him pleasantly, but there was something strange and unnatural in her manner that the girls were at a loss to understand.

"We *were* rather astonished for a moment," she acknowledged, "but as long as he didn't catch the bunny, I'll forgive him freely."

"From which I gather," the wanderer retorted, "that you are not particularly fond of the hunt."

"Indeed, I'm not," answered Miss Howland, with spirit. "Every animal's life has a value to me and I consider wanton cruelty to them almost as great a crime, and deserving of almost as great a punishment as one committed against humanity. But this is certainly not what I came to say," she interrupted herself, smiling winningly up at the admiring old trapper. "The girls and I have come to offer you the thanks and gratitude that we were so unable to express the night you brought them back to me."

The girls watched with interest to see the effect of this speech upon the stranger. All they saw was a slight deepening of his ruddy color and with a depreca-

tory wave of the hand he dismissed his part in the adventure as not worthy of consideration.

"It was nothing," he declared. "In fact, I have more reason to be grateful to you than you to me," he went on, with a twinkle in his eye. "To have had the power of relieving your anxiety was one of the greatest pleasures I have ever known."

Miss Howland thanked him, laughingly, then cordially invited him and his old housekeeper, of whom she had heard through Jim, and who, according to Mr. Wescott, had taken advantage of his absence to lay in provisions for the following week, to spend an evening with them as soon as possible around the campfire.

While this conversation was in progress the girls made friends with the big dog whom his master called "Bunk."

"That's a crazy name," Jessie criticized. "I wonder how he ever came to name him 'Bunk.'"

"It just fits you though, doesn't it, doggie," said Lucile, stroking him gently. "I wonder how you and Jed would get along?"

"We'll probably have a chance to find that out," said Evelyn, "if Mr. Wescott comes to the camp.

Where is Jed, anyway?" she asked, looking around.

"I'm sure he was with us when we started."

"Probably changed his mind and went back again," suggested Lucile. "The dog's not over fond of the heat and it's not what you could call a cold day."

"Come, girls," said Miss Howland, at last, "Mr. Wescott has consented to be with us this evening and he's promised to tell us some animal stories."

The girls' eyes sparkled. "True stories?" they cried, in unison.

"Yes, I can vouch for their being true," said Mr. Wescott, with a smile. "I was on the spot many times myself."

The girls could only utter an incredulous "oh," for they were too greatly awed by the prospect of having real animal tales related first hand by a *real* trapper, to say more or even thank him. However, as it happened, they had done the best thing to make him feel welcome at their camp that they could have done, for their silence was more to him than the greatest flow of eloquence.

When at last they did find their tongues he was besieged with a shower of questions that fairly took his breath away.

"Do you know any tiger stories?" they cried. "Oh, please tell us one about grizzlies, and lions—lions are the best," until Miss Howland stopped them.

"Perhaps Mr. Wescott will be kind enough to answer some of your questions when he comes to-night, but it would take him from now until sunset to answer all you have asked," she said.

So, reluctantly, and with many expressions of good will on both sides, they parted. Bunk seemed bent on following them, but when his master whistled he deserted, shamefully, without one look behind. They could still hear him barking when they were far advanced on the way to camp.

Dinner was over, and the girls, seated around the blazing fire, were eagerly awaiting their visitors. Showers of sparks rose from the crackling mass of dry timber and fled away among the dark leaves and branches, like brilliant fireflies. The moon shone silver bright and the woods beyond the circle of fire caught its pale radiance, and spread it over trees and shrubs and flowers, touching them with silver.

Again, as on that other night, the stars came down to touch the rivers, and through all the roar of fire the

girls could distinguish the soft splash of water as the ripples lapped gently upon the bank.

"What a night!" Jessie whispered; "it almost seems as if something were going to happen."

"Something is going to happen," said Margaret. "At least it is, if Mr. Wescott doesn't change his mind."

"Oh, I don't mean that," said Jessie, dreamily. "I mean something unusual—something that doesn't happen every day."

"Oh, come down to earth, Jessie," Margaret advised, "I don't think you know what you expect yourself."

"I don't expect anything," Jessie insisted. "I just feel as if something were going to happen."

"So you said before," remarked Evelyn, sweetly. "Let us hope you won't be disappointed."

Jessie looked threatening and Lucile hastened to change the subject. "Suppose," she said, "that Jed here should take it into his head to be jealous of Bunk and try to put him out."

At mention of his name, Jed, who had been lying near Lucile with his head in her lap, rose, shook himself, and yawned prodigiously.

"In such a case, I shouldn't wonder if Jed would get the worst of it," said Dorothy. "From your description of him, Bunk must be at least three times as large as Jed."

As she spoke the hair on the dog's back began to bristle and he growled, menacingly.

"Oh, they must be coming," cried Lucile, and she seized Jed by the collar. "What shall I do with the dog, Miss Howland?"

"Leave him alone," advised Miss Howland. "I don't think he will have much desire to fight when he sees the size of his would-be adversary."

Lucile did as she was told and followed her guardian to the clearing to welcome their visitors. In a moment they arrived, Mr. Wescott helping his old housekeeper over the rough places and Bunk, walking decorously at his master's side. Evidently, the dog had had a severe talking to that afternoon and had resolved to conduct himself as became a gentleman.

The housekeeper, an ancient aunt of the trapper, acknowledged the introduction with a quaint courtesy. In spite of her quaint ways, or, perhaps, because of them, Miss Howland and Lucile took a sincere liking

to the old lady from the first minute that made them very anxious to make her feel at home.

They had scarcely had time to meet their guests and turn with them toward the group of girls, who had risen and were waiting for them, when Jed trotted forward. With interest and not a little anxiety they watched the meeting. Jed, his tail in the air and ears cocked, inquiringly, marched up to the larger dog, who acknowledged his coming with a low growl.

"Bunk," said his master, sharply, "take care!"

At once the big dog subsided and, looking up at his master, wagged his tail meekly, as if in apology for the slip, and from that time on he and Jed became fast friends.

Laughingly, they watched the two dogs, little and big, walk off together amicably and seat themselves by the fire.

"Well, that's settled," said Mr. Wescott. "I was rather doubtful about bringing Bunk along, but he looked so reproachful when I said he had to stay home that I relented. Of course he promised faithfully to be good."

"He seems to be keeping his promise very well," laughed Miss Howland. "I only hope he doesn't break

it. If he should, I'm afraid there wouldn't be very much of Jed left."

"Oh, he won't forget while I'm around," said Mr. Wescott. "I can promise that, at least."

At last the introductions were over and they all resumed their places around the fire, Mr. Wescott and the old lady occupying the seats of honor, either side of Miss Howland.

Jessie and Evelyn put more fuel on the fire and it blazed up right merrily, sending its ruddy light far into the forest and dispelling for a moment the flickering shadows that hovered there.

Impatiently, the girls waited while the usual formalities were observed—talk of the country, the weather and the scenery, topics in which they had not the slightest interest—when there came a welcome interruption in the shape of Jim. He had been cordially invited by Miss Howland, but had not been sure he could get there.

"Oh, Jim," cried Lucile, "I'm so glad you came—we were beginning to think you couldn't."

Jim smiled and, upon Miss Howland's invitation, approached within the circle of fire and seated himself between Lucile and the old trapper. When Miss How-

land started to introduce him, Mr. Wescott said, "Oh, Jim and I know each other well."

From the grateful glance Jim shot at Mr. Wescott, Miss Howland gathered that the latter had not overestimated their friendship, but she could not help wondering why Jim had not mentioned it to her before.

After a few more minutes of casual conversation, Jessie could stand the strain no longer and broke in with, "Oh, Mr. Wescott, won't you tell us that story? We can't wait any longer."

Miss Howland reproved her with a glance, although she could not suppress a smile of amusement.

"Perhaps Mr. Wescott isn't ready to tell us a story, now, Jessie," she suggested, looking with an apologetic smile toward the trapper.

"Oh, I'm ready any time to tell a story," said the latter with cheery good humor. "What shall it be, lions, tigers, panthers——"

"Oh, panthers," Lucile broke in eagerly. "I always love to hear about them."

"Panthers it shall be then," said Mr. Wescott, "that is, provided everybody is willing."

By the manner in which they gathered close about the fire, and by the tense look in their faces, he evi-

dently concluded that his young hearers were not only willing but eager, and immediately continued:

“Well, I’ll tell you one that particularly interested me at the time. May I smoke?” he broke off to ask. “I never can tell a story the right way without a pipe. Thank you. Well it happened one winter when I was up North. It had been a mighty hard winter. Many of the trappers’ families were in a powerful bad way, what with the freezing cold and snow. And there was one woman, a mighty fine woman she was, too——” here he broke off and took two or three meditative puffs at his pipe, while the girls waited with ill-concealed impatience. “As I was saying, she was a mighty good woman, never thinking of her own ills and troubles but always trying to help somebody else with theirs. Well, one night a boy comes to her from one of the neighborin’ cabins, and he says, all tremblin’ and shakin’, and pleadin’ in a way that wrings her heart, and makes her mad to comfort him, ‘Please, ma’am, oh, my mother’s been taken pow’ful bad, ma’am, and she says as won’t you come over right away?’ ”

The girls felt the tears in their eyes, and Margaret said in a whisper, “Did she die?”

"No, she didn't die," the trapper answered. "It was all on account of the good woman, for she packed up all the healin' herbs she had, and followed the poor, shiverin' boy through the snow, and it was quite a pow'ful journey, too, to the cabin where the sick woman lay.

"When, as she opened the door, a man rose from the side of the bed where he had been kneeling, and came toward her, his face was so white and drawn that she wept at sight of it; but when she remembered all that must be done, and all that depended on her, she dashed away the tears and went to work.

"Half an hour later, she went into the room where she had left the man and his son, and found them fast asleep with their tired heads on the bare table. Without rousing them, she threw her coat about her, and left the house.

"It was bright and the moon was shining like to-night," the girls instinctively glanced up, "only the moon somehow seemed brighter there. As I said before, it was a pow'ful stretch between her cabin and the one she had left, and her path lay mostly through the woods.

"It was late now, and though not easily frightened,

she began to feel scary. The shadows flitted by her eerily, and the wind swept through the trees with a sound that made her shudder and draw her wrap more closely about her.

“Once her dress caught, and as she stooped to free it she glanced fearsomely over her shoulder. She saw nothing there but the flickering shadows. Once more she hurried on, faster and faster, till she found herself almost running over the snow.

“‘There’s nothing to be afraid of,’ she cried, passionately, and then, as if to belie her words, there came to her the sound of something pad-paddin’ over the snow.”

The girls felt the hair rise on their heads, and instinctively pressed close together. Save for the crackle of the fire and the deep voice of the trapper, not a sound was heard. Jessie seized Evelyn’s hand and squeezed it as the deep voice continued.

“For a moment she was too terrified to move, and she pressed her hand over her heart to still its beating, looking around her all the while like a wild thing. Now the sound had stopped, and there was nothing to break the silence but the sighing of the wind.

“‘Twan’t nothin’,’ she whispered, gaspingly, ‘I most

likely jest imagined it,' and with terror tugging at her heart she took a step forward.

"Again came the sound, sharp, distinct, unmistakable, even above the wind, and she whirled fiercely to meet it.

"With a cry of horror she shrank back against the tree and stared fascinated at two gleaming wicked eyes, and behind them, crouched ready to spring, the shadowy outline of a giant panther."

Jed chose this moment to fancy he saw something suspicious in the bushes and uttered a low growl. The girls jumped, and Ruth cried terrified, "What's that? Oh, what is it?"

"Only Jed," said Miss Howland, soothingly, although it must be admitted she had started with the rest. "Go on, Mr. Wescott, we'll see he doesn't interrupt again."

The girls, somewhat reassured, crowded up closer, and listened eagerly, though with many an apprehensive glance toward the shadows beyond.

The old trapper's pipe had gone out, but so absorbed was he in the story that he noticed neither this nor the interruption, but went on:

"With a moan she turned and stumbled on through

the snow, blinded, desperate, and always hearing that 'pad-pad' behind as the brute stole after, only awaiting as she knew, his moment to spring.

"As she ran her fright gave way to an overwhelming, passionate anger at the relentless, merciless fate that was pursuing her.

"She turned fiercely, and with a sudden motion picked up a large branch that lay at her feet.

" 'I won't die,' she cried, flourishing the branch frantically before the brute's bewildered eyes. 'Come on, come on,' she screamed, 'come on, I'm ready. I'll try my hand at the killin'.'

"Abashed, astonished, the panther drew back for a second, but growled menacingly.

" 'Go on,' she cried again, fiercely, but the brute's minute of astonishment had passed, and, snarling, he crouched for a spring.

"Then on the instant an inspiration came to her. Raising shaking, trembling hands to Heaven, she began to sing, quaveringly at first, but as she saw the miracle, her voice rose higher and stronger, even above the moaning of the wind.

"The panther's tense body relaxed, the savage gleam left his eyes, and he sat motionless, fascinated. It was

as if the music wove a spell about him which he could not break.

"On, on, she sang, not daring to stop, for hours, it seemed to her, for ages, until a break in her voice and a huskiness in her throat, made her realize that the end could not be long delayed.

"For some minutes more she kept on bravely, desperately, praying for succor, but she knew her one hope lay in the passing of some belated trapper. Now she could scarcely force the sound through dry, cracked lips, and the panther, growing restless, emitted a low, savage growl."

The girls gasped and shivered convulsively. "Go on, go on," they urged breathlessly.

The trapper bent forward, and with grave deliberation, relighted his pipe while the girls waited impatiently.

"Well," he continued, "for a few awful seconds she sang on, then her voice broke, she failed utterly. 'Oh, my God, my God!' she cried hoarsely, flinging herself forward, 'only You can help me now.'

"With a terrific roar the great beast sprang—

"Crack!—a flash—a sharp report—and, with a yell of agony the panther leaped into the air, and fell at

the feet of the fainting woman. One convulsive shudder and he lay still."

For a moment there was silence, while the trapper gazed steadily into the fire, and the girls scarcely dared to breathe.

"Oh!" cried Margaret, softly, her eyes agleam with excitement, "what happened then?"

"Yes, go on, please," the girls breathed, and Jessie added, "Was the panther really dead?"

The trapper drew a long sigh and, withdrawing his gaze from the fire, answered, quietly:

"Yes, the panther was dead, and it's a miracle the woman had not died in his stead. One minute more or less would have seen a terrible tragedy."

"But who fired the shot?" Lucile insisted.

"The trapper whose wife she had saved," was the answer. "Soon after she had left the cabin the trapper roused from his sleep. Finding her gone, and realizing her danger, he had hurried out to overtake her."

"Oh, then he was the one," cried Lucile in greatest excitement.

"Did you know him?" asked Jessie.

"I knew him very well," said Mr. Wescott.

Lucile eyed him suspiciously, and was about to ask another question, when Ruth called out, "But what happened to the woman, Mr. Wescott? You didn't tell us that."

"She fainted," he answered, laconically. "The man carried her to the house and then went for help. I have the panther skin yet."

He paused.

"You," Lucile cried. "Oh, I knew it. *You* were the man all along."

Mr. Wescott smiled, but not being able to deny the accusation, he very wisely confessed.

"That was wonderful," said Jessie. "Won't you tell us another?"

"Next time," he promised. "But as Aunt Deborah has fallen asleep, I'm afraid it's a very strong hint for us to be going home."

Aunt Deborah awoke, gazed about her with a look that challenged any one to say that she had been asleep, and drew her shawl more closely about her.

"Carston's stories interest you young ladies more than they do me," she remarked, dryly. "Probably you'll stay awake all night imagining you hear yells

and growls after listenin' to one of his hair-raisin' tales."

"She's right there," Lucile whispered to Jessie in conviction.

Mr. Wescott helped the old lady to her feet, and soon after, with the thanks of the girls ringing in their ears, they started for home.

"Aren't you afraid?" asked Margaret as they went out.

Mr. Wescott laughed pleasantly. "Not very," he answered. "We're proof against wild animals, even if there were any in these parts."

"I hope he is right about there not being any panthers and tigers around," Jessie confided to Lucile as a few minutes later they tumbled into bed. "While he was telling the story I distinctly saw something big with creepy-looking eyes gleaming at me from that clump of bushes just beyond the mess tent."

"Probably Bunk," Lucile replied, sleepily.

CHAPTER XVI

HEARTS UNITED

"AND the race is just one week off," said Jessie.

"Yes, we just have one more to practise," Lucile agreed, "and at the end of that time we'll have to show how much good it's done us."

"You don't think we can possibly lose, do you, Lucy?" asked her friend, alarmed at what she took to be an element of doubt in Lucy's tone.

"No, of course not," said Lucile. "If we think so much about losing we surely will, so the only thing to do is to say we are going to win, and then go ahead and do our best."

This conversation between the two girls took place the morning after Mr. Wescott had been to the camp and told them the blood-curdling panther story.

The morning was fine and fair and unusually mild for the time of year. In company with Jed they had sallied forth for an early morning walk.

"Do you know, I was thinking," said Lucile after

a pause, "that this is the first chance we have had to talk together alone since we came up here."

"I know, and it seems mighty good, too," said Jessie, snuggling up lovingly to her friend. "So much has happened, and the days have been so crowded that we seem somehow to have grown apart."

"Yes, and it won't do at all," said Lucile, decidedly. "Let's see how quickly we can grow back again. First of all, tell me about your mother. Does she expect to come up for the race?"

So engrossed were they in the delightful process of "growing back again" that they found themselves far advanced upon the road before they realized how late it was getting.

"Guess we'd better go back," said Lucile, looking about her, "we've never been so far in this direction before. I'm getting hungry, too. It seems to me I'm always hungry these days."

"So am I," said Jessie; "just now I could eat the side of a house."

"Do you remember that you said that very same thing over a year ago?" Lucile asked, and then as Jessie slowly shook her head, "Oh, yes, you did, that

morning we went for a walk before breakfast when we were just planning the camp-fire."

"Oh, I know what you mean now," cried Jessie; "the time we went up to see little Kenneth and he cried because we wouldn't take him over to see the gray kitten."

They laughed gaily at the memory. "He had a gray kitten of his own a couple of months later," said Lucille, "and he was awfully happy over it until it got to be an old story and wouldn't consent to be lugged around by the neck any more—oh!" she cried, and then stopped, her eyes fixed upon a young man who had come along the path by the brook and stopped before them in the roadway.

"I beg your pardon," he said, taking off his straw hat and mopping his forehead with a large silk handkerchief, "sorry if I startled you, but I have been a long time getting nowhere, so I've come to the conclusion that I must be lost."

He smiled with such engaging frankness that the girls were reassured and Lucile even found voice enough to murmur something about "being glad to help if she could."

"Thanks," said he instantly, "shouldn't be surprised

if you could. I am looking for a Mr. Wescott who lives near here. They have given me so many directions that I've lost my bearings. If you can tell me where he lives I'll be greatly obliged."

"Oh, yes, that's easy," said Lucile, eagerly, "we are going right near there, and we'll point it out to you if you wish."

"You're awfully kind," said the young man, warmly. "Am I mistaken in thinking you are camp-fire girls? Everybody is talking about you down in the village."

"We do belong to the camp-fire Aloea," Lucile admitted, as they turned back together, "but I didn't know everybody was talking about us."

"Guess you haven't been down to the village lately," he said, with an inquiring look.

Lucile shook her head. "Thought not," he nodded. "From what I heard I imagine they'll turn out to a man to see this famous race of yours. When is it coming off, anyway?"

The stranger's manner was so easy and good-natured that the girls soon found themselves conversing freely with him. When they came to the path leading to Wescott's cabin the young man thanked them heart-

ily and the girls saw him go with genuine regret, and not a little curiosity.

"I wonder who he is," said Jessie, as they started on.

"I wish I knew," Lucile answered, "he's so pleasant."

"*And* good looking," Jessie broke in, with a mischievous laugh.

"I was just going to say that," retorted Lucile, unruffled. "I wonder what he wants with Mr. Wescott?"

Jessie was seized with sudden inspiration. "Perhaps," she said, excitedly, "perhaps he is one of those trappers Mr. Wescott told us about."

"Huh," Lucile was skeptical, "he looks more like a man just out of college to me. He has 'city' written all over him."

"Well, maybe," said Jessie, a little crestfallen, "just the same, you've often said yourself not to go by appearances. Maybe he's traveling incognito."

"Oh, Jessie, Jessie," cried Lucile, despairingly, "you're still thinking of those old novels you used to devour by the cartload."

"Well, he looks just like all the pictures of the heroes in those same novels," she defended. "I'll show

you some of the pictures when we get home, if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I believe you," said Lucile, so readily that Jessie looked at her in surprise, "he couldn't very well be much handsomer. I do wish Miss Howland could see him."

"If he's a friend of Mr. Wescott we'll probably see him often enough—maybe too often for Miss Howland, if she happens to take a dislike to him."

"How could *she*?" cried Lucile; then, as she met Jessie's gleeful eyes she stopped, colored, and finally remarked, to cover her confusion, "don't be a goose, Jessie."

"I'll try not to be," said Jessie, so meekly that Lucile could not help laughing with her.

"Do you think we'd better tell the girls?" Jessie wondered, as they neared the camp, "they'd probably laugh."

"No doubt of it," said Lucile, "we'll tell Miss Howland, of course, and if she says anything to the girls about it they can't think we made it up."

A few minutes more and they came out upon the clearing that commanded a view of the camp. No one was in sight at the moment but Miss Howland,

who was talking to Mr. Wescott and Jim, who had been grudgingly granted a hard-earned holiday, about a huge fish they had just caught.

"Guess the girls must have gone scouting," Jessie surmised, and then for the second time within the space of thirty minutes they were startled by the good-looking stranger.

He pushed through the bushes, looked about him, and then went straight toward Mr. Wescott, who at sight of him had started violently and passed his hand over his eyes as if to clear his vision.

"Dad!" the younger man cried, and his voice was low with emotion, "I couldn't stay away any longer. I had to come."

Mr. Wescott grasped the outstretched hand in both his own as if he could never let it go. "You've come back," he repeated slowly, like one in a dream, "after all these years."

"Are you sorry, dad?" said the boy, unsteadily.

"I am glad," he said, simply, but there was that in his voice that said more than many words, and his eyes were misty.

Then suddenly Mr. Wescott seemed to realize that they were not alone, and turning, saw Miss Howland,

who had walked away a few paces, and stood looking out over the water. He called to her and she turned back.

Then the girls saw their guardian's face. From where they stood they could see but not be seen, and they were so bewildered by the amazing turn affairs had taken that they forgot for a moment that they were eavesdropping.

"Look at Miss Howland," Jessie whispered, excitedly. "I wonder what's the matter."

And then it happened. As she turned, the stranger caught sight of her face, and started as if he had seen a ghost.

"Helen!" he cried, "oh, my Helen!"

Then a wonderful thing happened.

Straight as a homing dove she went to him, and he caught her in his arms and held her fast. "You've come to me," she murmured, "I knew you would at last——"

Lucile caught Jessie's arm and drew her away. "Come," she said, and there was a hint of tears in her voice, "we shouldn't have stayed so long."

Jessie followed her in a daze. For a short distance they retraced their steps, and then sat down on a

grassy knoll until such time as they dared to return to camp.

"And to think I was wishing Miss Howland might see him," cried Lucile, and then putting her arms around her friend, she whispered, "Oh, Jessie dear, I'm sorry I laughed at your love stories——"

"There's not one of them half so good as this," cried Jessie, exultingly; "you can't deny it."

"No, I can't," Lucile admitted, happily.

CHAPTER XVII

"LIKE OTHER GIRLS"

"I CAN'T seem to get used to it," Jessie was saying to Evelyn, as they watched their beloved guardian talking earnestly to her fiancé. "I never thought it could really happen outside of a story book."

"Yes, and to think it is the same man that everybody thought she was going to marry back in Burleigh. Don't you remember? I wonder what happened, anyway."

"Why, it seems they quarreled about old Mr. Wescott. Miss Howland thought the son ought to be reconciled to his father, and he refused—so they just agreed to disagree."

"But what made him leave his father in the first place," persisted Evelyn. "Did they have a quarrel, too?"

"Why, Jim was telling Lucile about it the other day," said Jessie. "He knew about it all the time, for he knew Mr. Wescott before we came, and the

old man confided in him when he wouldn't talk to anybody else. But it would take too long to tell about it now, and besides it's almost time for practice."

"I know it is, but you'll have time for that. Go ahead, please."

"All right," said Jessie, "I'll tell you all I can, anyway. You know from what Mr. Wescott has told us that he had lived almost all his life in the wilderness and he'd set his heart on having his boy do the same."

"That's a natural enough way to feel," commented Evelyn.

"If you want me to finish, you'd better not interrupt," Jessie threatened.

"All right. Forgive me this time and I won't do it again."

"You'd better not. Well, when he grew up of course he had different notions and he begged his father to take him to the city and let him learn a profession."

"Where was the money coming from?" asked Evelyn, practically.

"Oh, Mr. Wescott has piles of money. He made it selling skins and things——"

"Especially things," mocked Evelyn.

"Now I won't tell you any more," Jessie began, but Evelyn caught her arm, imploringly.

"Go on, quick," she begged, "Miss Howland's coming now and we won't have another chance. Please."

And seeing that Miss Howland was indeed taking leave of her lover, Jessie relented.

"Well, the usual thing happened. Mr. Wescott refused, and when the son was just sixteen he ran away to New York. He walked most of the way, too."

"And he's just come back now?" Evelyn asked.

"So it seems, only this time he didn't walk. Isn't she sweet?"—this last referred to Miss Howland—"and doesn't she look happy?"

"If I didn't love her so much," Evelyn sighed, "I'd almost envy her."

At this moment their guardian was saying good-by to the insistent Mr. Jack Wescott, who had been urging her to take a walk with him through the woods.

"Can't do it, however much I'd like to," she cried, merrily, looking back over her shoulder at him so tantalizingly that he instinctively took a step toward her. Then, thinking better of it, he jammed his hands deep in his pockets, savagely, and stood gazing after her with a funny mixture of joy and chagrin.

"You know my time belongs to the girls yet," she added.

"Come, girls," she summoned. "It's time, and we want to do our very best to-day. Remember it's our last practice."

They could never explain how it happened, but they had scarcely pulled out from the shore before they went all to pieces as a racing machine. Lucile, who sat in the bow and acted as coxswain, tried hard to keep them steady, but it was no use. The strokes were jerky and uneven, and before they had gone half the distance some of the girls gave out entirely.

Lucile was anxious, but not disheartened, for Miss Howland had foreseen the possibility of this, and warned her to be on the lookout for it.

"It's very likely that they will be nervous with the race so near at hand," she had said, "and in that case, the only wise thing to do is to land as soon as possible. It will do more harm than good to try to force them just now."

Lucile remembered the advice and promptly acted on it. Weary and dispirited, the girls landed a few moments later to find Miss Howland waiting for them as though nothing had happened.

"Why, girls," she cried, merrily, "why the long faces? I didn't expect you to do brilliantly to-day."

The girls brightened a little at this, but their faces clouded again with apprehension when Marjorie cried:

"Yes, but if we don't do better than this to-morrow, we'll surely lose."

"But you *are* going to do better to-morrow. You are going to do better to-morrow than you ever have done before. To-morrow you're going to *win*," and Miss Howland brought out this last word with such a ringing confidence that the girls took heart of hope once more. Still, the morning's experience had left a feeling of depression, and no matter how hard they tried to cast it off, Marjorie's words echoed in their ears: "If we don't do any better than this to-morrow, we'll surely lose."

Miss Howland had consented to let Margaret stay with old Aunt Deborah until their return. The child was in a state of wild excitement, for Judge Stillman was expected with the rest, and she counted on going to him for the first time without the aid of a crutch.

"Daddy will be so glad," she had cried over and over again to the sympathetic girls. "Oh, we'll be the very happiest people in the world."

The girls themselves were very eager to see the meeting, for although they had had a proof of Judge Stillman's generosity in his gift of the canoes, they could not entirely shake off the impression they had grown up with that he was very hard and cynical. It was hard to change that opinion.

When the girls had trooped off, leaving the camp deserted, young Wescott chose the opportunity to have a confidential talk with Jim.

"Jim," he began, "my father has told me about your interest in everything mechanical. Have you ever had an opportunity to study different kinds of machines at first hand?"

"No, sir," answered Jim, eagerly, "I've never had much of a chance to study anything big, but I've often taken apart and put together the reapers and binders and such things on the farm."

"But you are interested and would study hard if you had the chance?" the young man inquired.

"Oh, yes," Jim replied, hardly daring to believe what the question implied.

"Then it's settled," said young Wescott, with an air of finality. "My father and I have decided to back you, partly because we like you and partly as a good

business investment.” How well he knew what would satisfy the boy’s pride and enable him to accept the offer without a loss of his self-respect. Before Jim could speak, he went on: “We want you to go back with us when we leave—that will be day after tomorrow, if you are willing.”

Willing! Willing! The boy stood dazed with the immensity of his good fortune.

“You mean,” he said, slowly, “you mean that you and your father are willing to take me, a poor boy without a cent to his name and one as hasn’t had no education to speak of——”

“And a great big heart and a mind that can easily be trained, and a decided ability that may amount to a genius for engineering,” young Wescott interrupted. “Don’t forget to mention everything on both sides of the ledger.”

“Then you mean it, you really mean it?” cried the boy, at last believing, “you’re going to take me to New York and give me a chance to make good.”

“Exactly.”

“And you really think it’s in me—that I *can* make good?”

“I’m sure of it.”

"Oh, Mr. Wescott, I want to thank you"—here he choked and lost his voice altogether.

"Don't try," said his benefactor with assumed gruffness. "Besides," he added lightly, "I'm not the one to be thanked. We're backing you as an investment. You see how sure we are. Come, shake hands, Jim. From now on we're going to be friends. What do you say?"

Jim grasped the extended hand eagerly.

"I'll do my best to deserve your goodness, sir," he said, and his steady blue eyes glowed with resolution, and undying gratitude.

"That's all we want," said Wescott, and then, as a murmur of faraway voices came to him, he linked his arm in Jim's and started for the woods.

"We'd better make a getaway before we're overwhelmed, Jim," he grinned.

Gradually the sounds grew more distinct, until one could distinguish the high, excited treble of the girls from the deeper tones of their elders. Then they burst in upon the camp in groups of twos and threes and half dozens, the parents trying to look twenty different ways at once as their impatient offspring pointed out places of interest.

"What's this I hear about Miss Howland?" asked Mr. Payton with a smile.

Lucile told him everything, and had hardly finished when she descried Miss Howland herself coming toward them.

"I'm so glad you could come, Mr. Payton," she said, cordially. "I suppose Lucile has shown you everything by this time, hasn't she?"

"Very nearly," Mr. Payton admitted, and then with the frank friendliness that characterized the man, he added: "I have heard of your happiness, Miss Howland, and I want to tell you how very glad I am."

"Thank you," blushed Miss Howland, showing the dimples that were scarcely ever absent these days. "You are all so kind that it makes me wish I were more deserving of the good wishes showered upon me."

"I'm sure you're more than worthy of all that this old world can give," said Mr. Payton, gallantly.

"Huh," said Lucile, "the world hasn't made anything good enough for her yet."

They laughed, and Miss Howland said, merrily:

"I'm afraid my girls are prejudiced, Mr. Payton. They give me a reputation that it's hard to live up to.

Judge Stillman," she called, as the latter passed near them, "will you come over here a moment? I don't believe you've met Mr. Payton."

The Judge acknowledged the introduction courteously, but Lucile noticed that his attention was wandering and his eyes roamed restlessly about as though in search of some one.

Miss Howland divined his thought and said, quickly: "I've sent for Margaret, Judge, and she'll be here directly. We left her in charge of Aunt Deborah," she went on to explain. "She's Mr. Wescott's housekeeper, and a better or kindlier soul never lived."

She continued chatting easily, but it was easy to see that beyond the first sentence Judge Stillman heard nothing of what she said, although he did try to keep his eyes steadily on her face.

He had just answered "No" to her question of "How long do you intend to stay," when there was a stir at the other end of the camp.

"There she comes now!" exclaimed Miss Howland.

At the words the deep lines of care seemed to be smoothed magically from his face and he actually smiled. The girls could not remember when they had seen him smile before, and they remembered wonder-

ing afterward why he did not do it oftener—it was such a nice smile and changed his face so wonderfully.

As Margaret came forward, the people fell away, making a pathway for her. When she caught sight of the Judge she ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

“Oh, daddy, daddy,” she cried, “I don’t need a crutch any more. I can walk. I’m just like other girls.”

The Judge swept her up in his arms, without a word—his little girl who was “just like other girls”—and bent his massive head over hers. There are emotions in the world too deep for anything but tears.

All the girls were crying from sheer happiness and sympathy with their little comrade, and the older women of the party looked on with brimming eyes. The men turned away, more moved than they cared to own, and examined minutely the first thing within reach. Jessie declared afterward that she had seen her father pick up a trowel, carefully wipe the mud from it with his silk handkerchief and put it in his pocket. He denied the accusation with some warmth, until she pulled the trowel from his pocket, thus clinching his guilt.

“But it’s such a surprise,” one of the ladies tremu-

lously remarked to Lucile. "No one had a notion that the child had so improved. I suppose it was the exercise that did it."

"Yes," agreed Lucile, "that and this glorious stimulating air."

But no one seemed to realize what Miss Howland and the Judge himself implicitly believed—that the loving companionship of young girls of her own age had been the chief cause of the wonderful cure.

It was a merry party that ranged the camp that afternoon. They spent a great part of the time on the river listening with keen interest while the girls related their experiences and pointed out the course of the race that was to take place to-morrow. Only when the sun was close to the horizon did they turn the boats toward shore.

Miss Howland had considered inviting them all to a camp supper, but on second thought concluded that to be unwise. The girls were already excited and wound up to a pitch far beyond normal—this she decided as she glanced from Lucile's flushed face to Jessie, who had three times tried to tie a knot in the tow-line and failed—and to prolong the excitement would be ruinous to their hopes for the morrow.

"No," she said, half aloud, "what they most need is rest and quiet and I must see that they get it."

At this point Lucile broke in on her meditations with a joyful cry of:

"Phil! I didn't think it was time for you yet."

Another moment and she was caught in a pair of strong arms and hugged with such ferocity that she cried out in a half strangled voice:

"You don't need to quite choke me, you old bear."

The "old bear" held her from him and gazed fondly and with a certain amount of pardonable pride at the radiant face and mass of tangled curls above.

"You're prettier than I ever thought you'd be, Lucy;" and this from a brother was praise indeed.

"How could she help it with such a brother?" said a sly voice behind him, and he turned quickly to confront Jessie.

"Hello, Jess, how are you?" he cried with genuine pleasure in his voice, and then added in a tone that frankly betrayed his admiration: "It's plain to be seen that the wild and woolly wilderness agrees with you, too."

"And Jessie deserves all the more credit because she hasn't a brother to catch her good looks from,"

said Miss Howland, gaily, as she came up with Mr. Payton.

"That's so," admitted Phil, gravely.

"That's not fair," Mr. Payton protested, "for even admitting that my son could serve as a model to his doting sister, which, being intimately acquainted with the young gentleman, I am much inclined to doubt," here Jessie chuckled audibly, and Phil gave her a reproachful glance, "even admitting that, we must remember that all the time this improvement was taking place she was separated from him by a hundred miles or more."

"Thanks, Dad," said Lucile in mock gratitude. "I have one friend, anyway."

"Yes, and here comes another," cried Miss Howland as Jed dodged among them and precipitated himself into Lucile's arms. Once there, he wriggled around until he could get his head over her shoulder and wagged his tail hard.

"Where did you get the dog?" asked Phil, all animation, as he, like Lucile, was a great lover of animals.

"Oh, he really belongs to Jim," Lucile explained, "but he's let us have him for the summer."

"Who's Jim?" Phil inquired.

"Oh, he's a native of these parts," answered Jessie. "He was chasing the dog when I last saw him."

"There he is over there," Lucile cried, seizing Phil's arm and dragging him where he could have a clear view of the upper end of the camp, "do you see him over back—no, not that way, silly—see, over there, leaning against that big tree."

"Oh, the brick-top," said Phil, inelegantly.

"I suppose you think you're setting me a good example now," retorted Lucile, scathingly. "I fail to see any 'brick-top,' but if by any chance you mean that nice-looking boy with red hair, he's the one I mean. But really, Phil," and her voice became more serious, "he's an awfully nice boy and I want you to be good to him."

"How am I going to be good to him if I don't know him?"

"There is some reason in that," Jessie remarked, innocently, and Phil shot her a suspicious glance. "I suppose there's no possible way of getting acquainted."

"Oh, stop this foolishness," laughed Lucile. "Come on, you two. I really think you will like him, Phil, when you *do* know him," and leaving their guardian and Mr. Payton talking to a party that had just landed

and were stretching their cramped muscles, the three young folks made their way over to where Jim was standing absorbed in viewing these people who had come straight from the wonderful city that he had only seen in his dreams.

Lucile was right in her prophecy, for after the first stiffness was over and Jim had conquered his shyness to some extent, they were soon plunged in an animated conversation, Jim asking questions about that great outside world with all the eagerness of his starved boy nature and Phil cordially responding. They became so engrossed in Phil's description of the last "World's Series" that the girls slipped away, unnoticed.

Late that night Lucile and Jessie lay on their cots, wide-eyed and sleepless.

"Jessie," whispered Lucile, "are you awake?"

"Yes, I've been awake for the last hour. I keep thinking about this morning and I just can't get to sleep. What's kept you awake?"

"Same thing I guess," confessed Lucile. "It's awfully silly, because we've just got to win and Miss Howland says that trouble like this morning's often

happens before a race or a play or anything like that. It's just a sort of stage fright."

"I know she did," said Jessie, somewhat comforted. "Anyway, there's no use worrying. I remember Miss Howland said, too, that if we thought we were going to lose we were much more likely to than if we made up our mind that there was no chance of losing."

"That's right," said Lucile, stifling a yawn. "And now, I almost feel as if I could get to sleep."

"So do I," said Jessie. "Let's."

Outside all was clear and calm and beautiful. The soft wind whipped the water into tiny ripples and set the trees to whispering. Somewhere, far off in the depths of the woods, a whippoorwill began its plaintive call. Still farther off, an owl set free by darkness sent his weird mournful cry shuddering through the night, and little birds, hearing, nestled closer to their mates or shifted their position fearfully.

And upon all, the moon looked down and smiled.

CHAPTER XVIII

VICTORY!

SLOWLY the sun rose on this day, this one day, the day when they "couldn't lose." As the first rays of light tinged the horizon, night sounds vanished as if by magic, replaced by sleepy twitterings, and the tuning up of bird musicians for a busy day. Swiftly the shadows melted before the golden onrush of sunbeams that dashed along the water, and played hide-and-seek among the dew-drenched flowers. In the madness of their joy at being free once more, they rushed into the tents where the girls were still sleeping, touched them gently with fairy fingers, whispering "Awake! awake! the beautiful day is come, and *such* a day!"

Lucile sat up and rubbed her eyes sleepily. Then suddenly the far-away look faded, and she threw back the covers with a jerk. Lightly she ran over to where Jessie lay and shook her none too lightly.

"Jessie, Jessie," she cried, "wake up!—it's come, it's come!"

"Let go my shoulder," muttered Jessie, still half in dreamland.

"Oh, wake up," cried Lucile, impatiently, ignoring the request. "I tell you it's come."

"What's come?" asked Jessie, awake and indignant. "You might wake me up more gently. I dreamed I was on a cannibal island, and the chief was dragging me along to dump me into the cauldron. Then you come along and half kill me over again."

Lucile laughed, gaily. "You ought to be glad I rescued you," she said, "instead of getting cross," and she put one arm around her friend's neck and administered a little impulsive hug by way of reconciliation.

Jessie hugged back with fervor. "I don't care what you do," she cried. "But what did you mean by shouting, 'It's here,' or 'He's come,' or something like that, huh?"

"I said, 'it's come,' and by that I meant *the race*," said Lucy.

At mention of the magic word Jessie shot from her cot like an arrow from a bow.

"Oh, the race, the race, the race!" she cried, and catching Lucile about the waist, whirled her around wildly.

"Lucy, why didn't you wake me before," and not heeding Lucile's "I tried to," went on. "Come on, let's go and wake up all the girls."

"We have already," said Lucile, as the girls began to pour from their tents into the open.

"Jessie, darling," she said, turning to her friend a face so serious that the other sobered instantly, "this will probably be the last chance we'll have to say a word alone till after the race. Let's make up our minds now that whatever happens we will behave like true camp-fire girls."

"We will," said Jessie, and between the two it was a solemn compact.

Then followed a morning of busy preparation and excitement. The day before Miss Howland had consulted with the girls' parents and it had been agreed that they should break camp the day of the race, and all take the night train for home. The girls had protested, but when Miss Howland had pointed out the advantage of a day at home before their school work began once more, they had reluctantly resigned themselves to their fate. After all, there was this one more day, and that the most wonderful day of the summer. The race was still to be won.

In spite of all Miss Howland could do to quiet them, the girls were keyed to the breaking point. There was scarcely one of them who remembered clearly afterward anything they did that morning. The tasks assigned to them were accomplished automatically. It seemed as if their very hearts beat out with each rhythmic pulsation the one word "race," "race," "race." They never knew how that long morning passed, but it did at last, and it was time to don their suits.

"Oh, Jessie, I'm scared, aren't you?" said Evelyn, as they passed on their way to Miss Howland's rendezvous, "I'm so scared I'm trembling—look," and she held out an arm that refused to be steady.

"No, I'm not nervous," denied Jessie, through clenched teeth; "at least, I'm trying not to be."

"Listen, I can hear something along the road," cried Evelyn, gripping Jessie's arm in a grasp that ordinarily would have made her cry out with pain; "they're coming, oh, Jessie, they're coming."

"Well, let them come," said Jessie, with a weak attempt at levity, and in another moment they were standing lined up before their guardian.

Miss Howland's face was very white, but there was

a cheerful smile on her lips that reassured the faintest heart. Now she was speaking, and the girls drank in the words eagerly.

"There are just a few things I want to speak to you about," she said, and her clear voice sent a thrill to the hearts of the girls who loved her. "You all know the course of the race, and the rules that govern it, but I'm going over them once more."

The girls stirred, and crowded forward.

"In the first place, you are to paddle over to Bleacher's Point, where Mr. Wescott will be stationed. The opposing crew may be waiting for you—but if they are not, you must wait there quietly until they come. When you have both reached your appointed places, raise your paddles in salute. Then turn the canoe's bow outward and the stern in a line with the stake driven in to mark your starting point, and paddle out until your bow grazes Mr. Wescott's boat, which will be stationed fifty feet from shore. Mr. Wescott will then withdraw his canoe, and you will wait with raised paddles for the starting signal. That's all, I think, although remember, girls, two things," and she bent forward, her eyes shining and her voice vibrant with earnestness, while every word burnt itself into

their souls. "Keep your eyes on Lucile, and *conserve your strength*."

"And now, my girls," she cried, drawing herself up to her full height, while her eyes flashed fire, "prove you are worthy of the camp-fire cause and keep one word and one only before you always—victory!"

"Aloea!" cried Lucile, "three cheers for our camp-fire!"

"Aloea, Aloea, Aloea!" The woods rang with the shout, and scarcely had it died, when Jessie cried, "And now, three cheers for Aloea's ruler, our guardian."

With all the love of their hearts they gave the cheer, and Miss Howland, looking down upon their flushed faces and shining eyes, felt that they could not lose.

"Thanks, my girls," she cried; "and now, it's time to be off. Good luck, and what is better, a firm hand and a steady nerve."

And now they had pulled off from shore and each stroke of the paddles brought them nearer to the starting point.

The course of the race extended over two miles. It was by no means an easy one, for in that distance

they had to round two islands, circling the first island to the left and the other to the right, in the shape of a scroll. At the farther end of the course a rope had been stretched between a boat that lay fifty yards out from the shore to a tree at the edge of the water so that the rope lay loosely on the surface. At this point Mr. Stevens, Miss Stevens' father, stood ready to signal the end of the race. Here also were gathered the friends and relatives of the contestants, while Judge Stillman, Mr. Payton, and two gentlemen from the opposing side had been selected to act as judges. They were talking excitedly, and not a little anxiously, for all knew how each girl had set her heart on winning. Needless to say, Phil was there, and although he tried his best to appear unconcerned and indifferent, he only succeeded in making his nervousness more marked.

"Oh, I was only thinking how bad Lucy would feel if she lost," he remarked in answer to his father's question, "Why so restless, Phil?"; "I should think you'd feel a little uneasy yourself," he added, reproachfully.

"Oh, I do," Mr. Payton answered, adding slyly, "the only difference being, that I have one to be anxious for, while you have two."

Phil flushed. "Aw, cut it out, dad. I thought you

had more sense." Although the answer was not in the least respectful, Mr. Payton only favored his son with a sly wink, and changed the subject.

"The whole country seems to have turned out to see the race," he said.

Phil nodded. "Yes, the whole river front is crowded as far as you can see. I guess they don't have a chance to see anything like this very often."

On the other side of the river the girls had come to the rendezvous. The others had not reached the point yet, and our girls had a few seconds to look about them. The banks were crowded, as Phil had said, with country people out for a holiday. As the girls passed them, they pressed forward to see the camp-fire girls, about whom they had heard so much.

To the girls all these people were merely a mass of blurred faces, while the one figure that stood out clearly was the memory of their guardian as they had left her. To them she was the incarnation of that word, "victory," that she had said to keep ever before them, and each one in her heart of hearts had determined that day to win.

They had not long to wait, and as the others came up they raised their paddles high in salute, then, turn-

ing, paddled out until their bow touched young Wescott's boat. Slowly Wescott drew away, and they rested, with paddles poised above the calm water. With hearts wildly beating, and scarcely daring to breathe, they waited for the shot that would release their taut muscles, and send their canoes darting through the water. Not ten yards away was the other canoe, like them, awaiting the signal.

Bang! With a single movement, the paddles struck the water and the canoes sprang forward like horses at the touch of the spur. Slowly at first, with long even strokes, they pulled together side by side and bow to bow. Then, almost imperceptibly, Alice quickened her stroke and drew ahead. Again she changed the stroke, and the gap became more noticeable. Faster and faster the "Arrow" drew away, until it was half a length ahead.

Lucile quickened her stroke slightly and for a long time the relative positions remained the same. On, on, with a strong, steady swing that sent the canoe without a jerk or jar. It was the stroke that our girls had practised so faithfully and they knew that they could keep it up indefinitely.

Now they were nearing the first island. Their

rivals had an advantage here, for theirs was the inside course. Faster and faster went the "Arrow," but Lucile held the same steady stroke, even when the "Arrow" shot ahead, putting a full length between them.

The girls began to feel nervous. The "Arrow" was far ahead now and with the added advantage how could they hope to overtake them. Suddenly they felt a wild desire to quicken the stroke, regardless of consequences, and close in upon the enemy that was widening the distance between them with every passing second. Oh, why didn't Lucy hurry? Was she crazy to sit there and see the others win without even a struggle? Then came the memory of Miss Howland, and she had said: "Keep your eyes on Lucile and conserve your strength."

Now the "Arrow" had rounded the island and was pulling hard. Lucile quickened the stroke, and the canoe shot ahead. The distance lessened a trifle, but Alice urged her crew on and the "Arrow" darted forward like a wild thing. Lucile could see that her rivals were using the last ounce of strength they possessed, and she smiled to herself.

But on shore they didn't understand. Many

thought the race already won, and the "Arrow's" friends were rejoicing openly.

Phil looked gloomy and wrathful.

"What do they want to gloat for before they've won?" he muttered, and then, impatiently, "Why doesn't Lucy speed up some? It's all right to go slow in the beginning, but it seems to me she is overdoing it."

"There she goes!" cried Mr. Payton, "Look, now she's speeding up!"

The spectators leaned forward eagerly. The premature joy of the opposing party died away, and a cheer went up from Aloea's supporters that reached the girls and gave them new incentive.

They had come to the second island now, and at that point both canoes were hidden from view. When they had once rounded it there would be only half a mile left to the finish, and it seemed far too short a distance to make up such a lead.

The "Arrow" shot into view and had made an eighth of a mile toward the goal before the "Aloea" appeared.

"Oh, they can't do it now, dad," groaned Phil; "poor Lucy."

"Don't you or anybody else pity Lucy yet," commanded Mr. Payton; "what kind of a sport are you, anyway? Don't you see that Lucy has let the others tire themselves out, and that her crew is as fresh as ever? Now just watch, and don't talk."

It was something to watch. In spite of the condition of the "Arrow" crew, Lucile wondered if, after all, she had waited too long for the final spurt.

"We've got to do it now," she muttered grimly, and the girls felt that the time had come.

"Now, girls!" she cried, "steady!"

The canoe jumped forward, and then the real race began, a race that those stolid country folk never forgot.

All the girls' pent-up energy was in the sharp strokes that cut the water like a knife and sent the canoe forward at incredible speed. For the first time since the race began, the girls felt exhilarated, invigorated, and confidence returned with a rush. The "Arrow" had covered half the distance to the line, but the "Aloea" was gaining with the rapidity of lightning.

Alice heard them coming and desperately urged her fagged crew on. "Girls, we've got to make it," she cried; "we're almost there now."

Gallantly they summoned what little strength remained for a last effort. The canoe shot forward, and the watchers held their breath. They were very close now. The "Aloea" had crept up until her bow nosed the stern of the "Arrow."

"We must, we must," cried Lucile, over and over to herself.

On, on they came, racing like demons, the water boiling away from the bows, and the girls bent nearly double, putting all their strength into a last spurt that meant victory or defeat.

The "Arrow" still led by half a length, but the "Aloea" was creeping steadily up. Twenty yards to go, and half a length to make up—Phil dug his nails into the palms of his hands, unknowing.

"Go it, Lucy," he cried, "go it!"

Lucile straightened in her seat, and a thrill went through the girls behind her.

It was the "slant" stroke, one she had herself discovered and taught them. It worked like magic. The canoe seemed imbued with new life. In three powerful strokes it forged ahead. A shot rang out, and a great shout went up.

The "Aloea" had won by a nose!

For a few yards the momentum carried the canoes forward, but the girls soon stopped, and, turning, paddled slowly back to shore. In a moment the canoes were surrounded by a crowd of excited, gesticulating figures, and the girls were lifted to the bank. And then Lucile and her crew were hugged, and shaken hands with, and congratulated, until it was a wonder that they ever came out of it alive.

Above all, Miss Howland's words of praise rang sweetest in their ears:

"It was great, girls. You earned the victory."

Phil was just telling Lucile what a "brick" she was, when there was a movement in the crowd that surrounded her, and Alice pushed her way through.

"I want to offer you congratulations in behalf of myself and crew," said she, and added with a smile, "we are proud to surrender to so worthy a victor. You beat us fairly, that we know, although we can't understand just how you did it."

"It was a hard race," said Lucile, accepting the proffered hand, and shaking it warmly. "I thought you had us, up to the last minute. Perhaps we'll have a race some other time that'll square things."

"Perhaps," said Alice, and went away with a smile

on her lips—a smile that, covering so sore a heart, stamped her as a thoroughbred.

The crowd was enthusiastic about the race, pronouncing it “the durndest, exciting thing they ever saw,” and gladly offered to give the girls and their friends a lift back along the road to camp.

This they were glad to accept, for after the excitement of the day they found themselves very tired. Although there was scant room for so large a party they managed to squeeze in some way, and forgot tired, aching muscles in glad exultation at the outcome of the race.

“Oh, Lucy, you’re a wonder!” Jessie cried, “there was one time when I thought you didn’t know what you were doing, but I ought to have known better.”

“And to see that canoe drawing away from us,” said Marjorie, leaning forward excitedly at the recollection. “Oh, Lucy, I felt as if I just had to quicken the stroke.”

“If you had——” said Lucile, threateningly.

“It would have been all up with you I’m thinking,” Phil finished, from his place, further up in the wagon. “Say, Lucy, where did you get that stroke, anyway, that last one?”

"Oh, I just picked it up one day when we were practising," said Lucile. "It seemed good then, and it certainly didn't fail us to-day."

"It sure didn't," called out Margaret, from the wagon alongside, where she sat with her hand in Judge Stillman's. "Lucy, I do believe we won because of the camp-fire. If the others had been camp-fire girls, they'd have had a better chance to win."

"Hurrah for the camp-fire," cried Phil, boisterously, and the others took up the shout.

"Just the same," Mr. Payton was saying to Judge Stillman, "the camp-fire is a capital thing for our girls."

"You're right," agreed the Judge, smiling fondly into the upturned face of his little daughter, whom the camp-fire had made like other girls. "It has given me the one thing I wanted most."

As he spoke, the camp, or what had been the camp, came in view. Only one small tent had been left standing, in which the girls were to change to their traveling dress.

Lightly the girls jumped from the wagon as it stopped at the clearing and ran toward the tent.

"Hurry," cried Miss Howland. "We only have half

an hour to catch the train. We're later than we thought."

"All right," called out Lucile. "We'll be with you in a minute."

"Yes you will," scoffed Phil.

Inside the tent there was the wildest scramble.

"Jessie, you've got my suit," cried Evelyn.

"I have not," denied Jessie. "Don't you suppose I know my own when I see it?"

"Well then, who has got it?" she cried, desperately.

"Oh, Evelyn, stop making such a noise. Here it is," and Dorothy held up the missing article, which was sadly missed.

"Huh. I suppose you were sitting on it," said Evelyn, ungratefully.

"That's all I get—oh, Marjorie, stop stepping on my foot," she groaned.

"Jessie, hand over that hat behind you, will you?" called Lucile. "I thought you were trying to hide something."

"I'm not trying to hide anything but a guilty conscience," retorted Jessie as she tied up her shoe.

"Why the guilty conscience?" queried Marjorie.

"What awful thing have you been up to now?"

"Up to her old tricks again," said Evelyn, and Jessie threw her a malicious glance.

"Go on, tell us about it, Jessie," urged Lucile. "A frank confession, you know."

"I ate some candy Alice Hague gave me the other day. I couldn't resist the temptation. Oh, and it was awful stuff," making a wry face at the recollection.

"Glad of it; serves you right," said Dorothy.

"Come on, girls, I'm ready," broke in Lucile. "We'll have to hurry or they'll go without us," and throwing her arm about Margaret, she led the way out of the tent.

As they stepped out upon the grass, Jim came hurrying past them and stopped for a moment with a sheepish grin on his face. For a moment they hardly recognized him.

Young Wescott had rigged him out in a new suit, well-fitting shoes, and—wonder of wonders—a new straw hat.

The girls all crowded around him, and Lucile cried: "Jim, I hardly knew you. Oh, you do look fine."

At her sincere praise, a pleased look came into his eyes and he smiled happily.

"Jed is going, too," he said, simply.

"And here he is to speak for himself!" exclaimed Jessie as Jed came up to them, barking wildly. "Come here, Jeddie, old boy."

While the girls had been dressing Mr. Payton and Judge Stillman had engaged one of the farm wagons to take their luggage to the station. Another was reserved for themselves and it was arranged that the canoes should be sent on later. Everything had been packed except the one tent, and while this last was being added to the load the girls went down to the water's edge.

Their gaze traveled out over the course of the race and again they thrilled with jubilation at their success. Their hearts went out especially in gratitude to their guardian, who had made it all possible. And as if in harmony with their thought, her voice just then called to them from the clearing:

"Everything ready, girls. Come along."

Hurriedly they gathered up their things and were ready to start.

"It's a shame we have to go off in such a rush," said Margaret. "It seems as though we must be coming right back again."

Lucile and Jessie, Phil and Jim, with Jed bringing up the rear, were the last to leave the woods.

"Oh, I don't want to go home," wailed Lucile, as they stopped for a last look, "I want to stay here forever and ever."

"Well, you will stay here till 11:10 if we miss this train," said her unromantic brother. "I can always fix up a race for you at home if you get pining for one."

"We don't need any after to-day," said Lucile, slipping her arm through Jessie's. "Oh, Jessie, wasn't it glorious?"

Mr. Payton's voice reached them from the roadway.

"Where are the rest?"

"We're coming," they answered.

* * * * *

The shadows fell thick and fast over the deserted camp and once more the forest prepared for slumber. The stars came out one by one and saw their beauty reflected in the clear depths of the river. The whispering winds, the ripples breaking on the shore seemed to miss the glint of the fire through the trees and to waft good wishes after the departing visitors. While in the distance sounded the faint echo of the whistle, as the train, with its radiantly happy party of camp-fire girls, sped away through the night.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 010 297 157 7